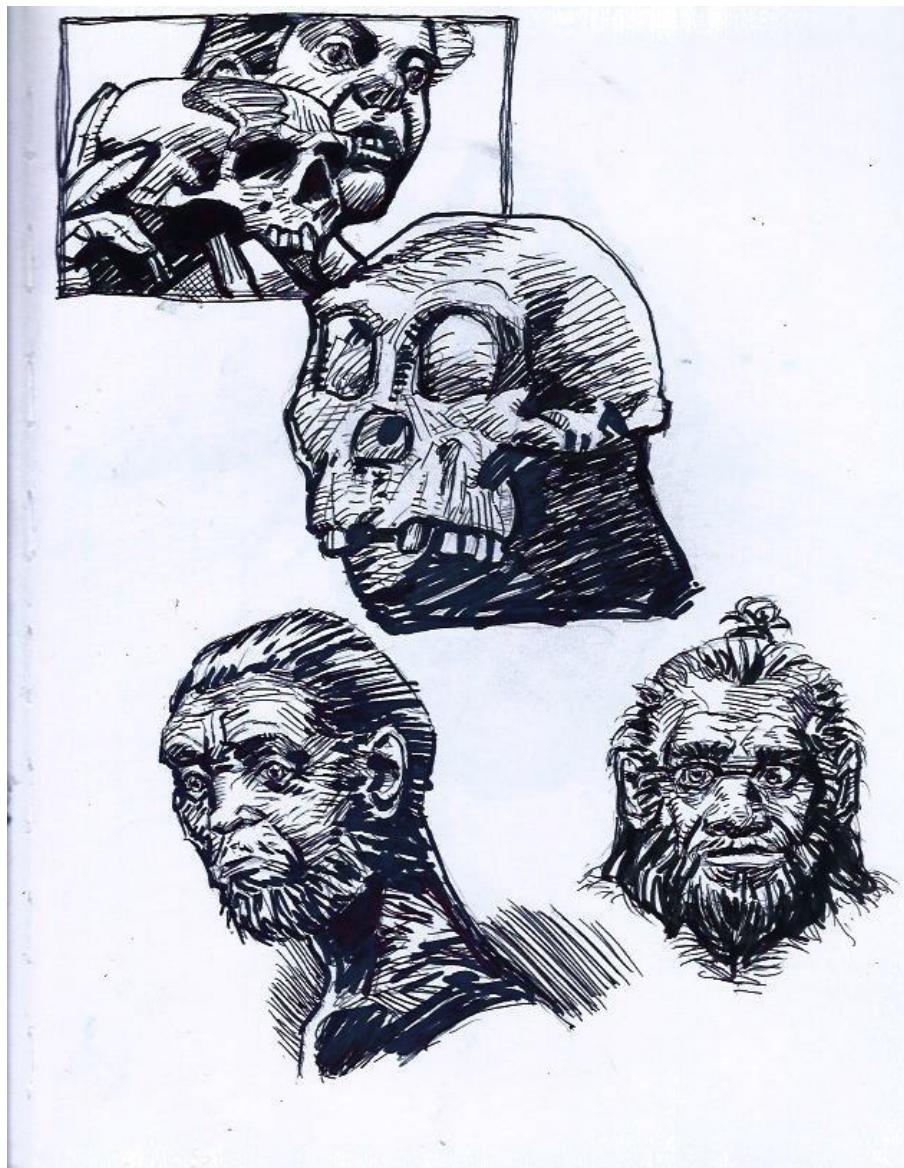


# ASTOUNDING GALAXY OF FUTURE IFS

Pulp Science Fiction, 1929-1963

Anthology Edited by Matt Pierard from texts found on Project Gutenberg.



*Humanoids*, by John Pierard ©2019

# THE UNDERSEA TUBE

By L. Taylor Hansen

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If my friend the engineer had not told me the Tube was dangerous, I would not have bought a ticket on that fatal night, and the world would never have learned the story of the Golden Cavern and the City of the Dead. Having therefore, according to universal custom, first made my report as the sole survivor of the much-discussed Undersea Tube disaster to the International Committee for the Investigation of Disasters, I am now ready to outline that story for the world. Naturally I am aware of the many wild tales and rumors that have been circulated ever since the accident, but I must ask my readers to bear with me while I attempt to briefly sketch, not only the tremendous difficulties to be overcome by the engineers, but also the wind-propulsion theory which was made use of in this undertaking; because it is only by understanding something of these two phases of the Tube's engineering problems that one can understand the accident and its subsequent revelations.

It will be recalled by those who have not allowed their view of modern history to become too hazy, that the close of the twentieth century saw a dream of the engineering world at last realized--the completion of the long-heralded undersea railroad. It will also be recalled that the engineers in charge of this stupendous undertaking were greatly encouraged by the signal success of the first tube under the English Channel, joining England and France by rail. However, it was from the second tube across the Channel and the tube connecting Montreal to New York, as well as the one connecting New York and Chicago, that they obtained some of their then radical ideas concerning the use of wind power for propulsion. Therefore, before the Undersea Tube had been completed, the engineers in charge had decided to make use of the new method in the world's longest tunnel, and upon that decision work was immediately commenced upon the blue-prints for the great air pumps that were to rise at the two ends--Liverpool and New York. However, I will touch upon the theory of wind-propulsion later and after the manner in which it was explained to me.

It will be recalled that after great ceremonies, the Tube was begun simultaneously at the two terminating cities and proceeded through solid rock--low enough below the ocean floor to overcome the terrible pressure of the body of water over it, and yet close enough to the sea to overcome the intensity of subterranean heat. Needless to say, it was an extremely hazardous undertaking, despite the very careful surveys that had been made, for the little parties of workmen could never tell when

they would strike a crack or an unexpected crevice that would let down upon them with a terrible rush, the waters of the Atlantic. But hazard is adventure, and as the two little groups of laborers dug toward each other, the eyes of the press followed them with more persistent interest than it has ever followed the daily toil of any man or group of men, either before or since.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once the world was startled by the "extree-ee--" announcing that the English group had broken into an extinct volcano, whose upper end had apparently been sealed ages before, for it contained not water but air--curiously close and choking perhaps, but at least it was not the watery deluge of death. And then came the great discovery. No one who lived through that time will forget the thrill that quickened the pulse of mankind when the American group digging through a seam of old lava under what scientists call the "ancient ridge," broke into a sealed cavern which gleamed in the probing flashlights of the workers like the scintillating points of a thousand diamonds. But when they found the jeweled casket, through whose glass top they peered curiously down upon the white body of a beautiful woman, partly draped in the ripples of her heavy, red hair, the world gasped and wondered. As every school child knows, the casket was opened by curious scientists, who flocked into the tube from the length of the world, but at the first exposure to the air, the strange liquid that had protected the body vanished, leaving in the casket not the white figure, but only a crumbling mass of grey dust. But the questions that the finding of the cave had raised remained unanswered.

[Illustration]

Who was this woman? How did she get into the sealed cavern? If she had been the court favorite of that mythical kingdom, now sunk beneath the waves, and had been disposed of in court intrigue, why would her murderers have buried her in such a casket? How had she been killed? An unknown poison? Perhaps she had been a favorite slave of the monarch. This view gained many converts among the archaeologists who argued that from all the evidence we have available, the race carrying the Iberian or Proto-Egyptian culture, long thought to have been the true refugees from sinking Atlantis, were a slight dark-haired race. Therefore this woman must have been a captive. Geologists, analyzing the lava, announced that it had hardened in air and not in water, while anthropologists classed the skull of the woman as essentially more modern than either the Neanderthal or Cro-Magnon types. But the engineers, secretly fuming at the delay, finally managed to fill up the cave and press on with their drills.

Then following the arguments that still flourished in the press, came a tiny little news article and the first message to carry concern to the

hearts of the engineers. The sea had begun to trickle in through one slight crack. Perhaps it was only because the crevice was located on the English side of the now famous "ancient ridge" that the article brought forth any notice at all. But for the engineers it meant the first warning of possibly ultimate disaster. They could not seal the crack, and pumps were brought into play. However, as a month wore on, the crack did not appear to widen to any material extent and the danger cry of a few pessimists was forgotten.

Finally, it will be remembered, that sounders listening in the rocks heard the drillers of the other party, and then with wild enthusiasm the work was pushed on to completion. The long Tube had been dug. Now it only remained for the sides at the junction to be enlarged and encased with cast iron, while the work of setting up the great machines designed to drive the pellet trains through, was also pushed on to its ultimate end. Man had essayed the greatest feat of engineering ever undertaken in the history of the planet, and had won. A period of wild celebration greeted the first human beings to cross each direction below the sea.

Did the volume of water increase that was carried daily out of the Tube and dumped from the two stations? If it did, the incident was ignored by the press. Instead, the fact that some "cranks" persisted in calling man's latest toy unsafe, only attracted more travel. The Undersea Tube functioned on regular schedule for three years, became the usual method of ocean transit.

\* \* \* \* \*

This was the state of matters, when on the fourth of March last, our textile company ordered me to France to straighten out some orders with the France house, the situation being such that they preferred to send a man. Why they did not use radio-vision I do not care to state, as this is my company's business.

Therefore, upon entering my apartment, I was in the midst of packing when the television phone called me. The jovial features of "Dutch" Higgins, my one-time college room-mate and now one of the much-maligned engineers of the Undersea Tube, smiled back at me from the disk.

"Where are you? I thought we had a sort of dinner engagement at my apartment, Bob."

"By gollies I forgot, Dutch. I'll be right over--before it gets cold."

Then immediately I turned the knob to the Municipal Aerial-car yards, and ordered my motor, as I grabbed my hat and hurried to the roof. In due time, of course, I sprang the big surprise of the evening, adding:

"And, of course, I'm going by the Tube, I feel sort of a

half-partnership in it because you were one of the designers."

A curious half-pained look crossed his face. We had finished our meal, and were smoking with pushed-back chairs. He finished filling his pipe, and scowled.

"Well? Why don't you say something? Thought you'd be--well, sort of pleased."

He struck his automatic lighter and drew in a long puff of smoke before answering.

"Wish you'd take another route, Bob."

"Take another route?"

"Yes. If you want it straight, the Tube is not safe."

"You are joking."

But as I looked into his cold, thoughtful blue eyes, I knew he had never been more serious.

"I wish that you would go by the Trans-Atlantic Air Liners. They are just as fast."

"But you used to be so enthusiastic about the Tube, Dutch! Why I remember when it was being drilled that you would call me up at all kinds of wild hours to tell me the latest bits of news."

He nodded slowly.

"Yes, that was in the days before the crack."

"Yet you expected to take care of possible leaks, you know," I countered.

"But this crack opened after the tunnel had been dug past it, and lately it has opened more."

"Are the other engineers alarmed?"

"No. We are easily taking care of the extra water and again the opening seems to remain at a stationary width as it has for the past three years. But we cannot caulk it."

"Are you going to publish these views?"

"No. I made out a minority report. I can do no more."

"Dutch, you are becoming over-cautious. First sign of old age."

"Perhaps," with the old smile.

"But after all it is now more than three years since we have had a talk on the Tube. After it began to function as well as the Air-Express you sort of lost interest in it."

"And the world did too."

"Certainly--but the public ever was a fickle mistress. Who said that before me?"

He laughed and blew out a long puff of smoke.

"Everyone, Bob."

"But as to the Tube, if I cross under the sea, I would want to be as well informed on the road as I was three years ago. Now in the meantime, you have dropped interest in the long tunnel while I have become more interested in textiles--with the result that I have forgotten all I ever did know--which compared to your grasp of the details, was little enough."

\* \* \* \* \*

But his face showed none of the old-time animation on the subject. What a different man, I mused to myself, from that enthusiastic engineering student that I used to come upon dreaming over his blue-prints. He was considered "half-cracked" in those days when he would enthuse over his undersea railroad, but his animated face was lit with inspiration. Now the light was gone.

"Well, Dutch, how about it? Aren't you going to make me that brief little sketch of the length plan and cross-section of the Tube? I remember your sketch of it in college, and it tends to confuse me with the real changes that were made necessary when the wind-propulsion method was adopted."

"All right, old timer. You remember that the Tube was widened at the sides in order that we could make two circular tubes side by side--one going each way."

"I had forgotten that they were circular."

"That is because of the pressure. A circle presents the best resistance," and picking an odd envelope from his pocket, he made the following sketch and passed it to me.

I nodded as I recognized the cross-section.

"Now the plan of the thing is like this," he added, putting aside his pipe and pulling a sheet of paper from the corner of his desk.

Rapidly, with all his old accuracy, he sketched the main plan and leaned over as he handed it to me.

"You see," he explained, picking up his pipe again, "both pumps work at one time--in fact, I should say all four, because this plan is duplicated on the English side. On both ends then, a train is gently pushed in by an electric locomotive. A car at a time goes through the gate so that there is a cushion of air between each car. The same thing happens at Liverpool. Now, when the due train comes out of the suction tube, it goes on out the gate, but the air behind it travels right on around and comes in behind the train that is leaving."

"But how are you assured that it will not stall somewhere?"

"It won't be likely to with pressure pumps going behind it and suction pumps pulling from in front. We can always put extra power on if necessary. Thus far the road has worked perfectly."

"How much power do you need to send it through, under normal conditions?"

"Our trains have been averaging about fifty tons, and for that weight we have found that a pound pressure is quite sufficient. Now, taking the tunnel's length as four thousand miles (of course it is not that long, but round figures are most convenient) and the tube width eleven and one quarter feet each and working this out we have 3,020,000 cubic feet of free air per minute or 2,904,000 cubic feet of compressed air, which would use about 70,000 horse power on the air compressor."

"But isn't the speed rather dizzy?"

"Not any more dizzy, Bob, than those old fashioned money-carrying machines that the department stores used to use--that is in comparison to size. The average speed is about 360 feet a second. Of course, the train is allowed to slow down toward the end of its run, even before it hits the braking machinery beyond the gate."

"But how much pressure did you say would be put on the back of the diaphragm--I remember that each car has a flat disc on the back that fits fairly tightly to the tube ..."

"The pressure on the back is less than seven tons. However, the disc does not fit tight. There are several leaks. For instance, the cars are

as you know, run on the principle of the monorail with a guiding rail on each side. The grooves for the rails with their three rollers are in each car. There is a slight leakage of air here."

"You used the turbo type of blower, didn't you?"

"Had to because of the noise. We put some silencing devices on that and yet we could not kill all of the racket. However a new invention has come up that we will make use of soon now."

\* \* \* \* \*

"But I can't understand, Dutch, why you seemed so put out when I announced my intention of going to Europe via the Tube. Why, I can remember the day when that would have tickled you to death."

"You followed the digging of the Tube, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"You remember the volcano and lava seams?"

"Yes."

"Well, I do not believe that the crack was a pressure crevice. If it had been, we were far enough below the ocean floor to have partly relieved the situation by the unusually solid building of the Tube. The tremendous shell of this new type of specially hardened metal--"

"And the rich concrete that was used as filling! That was one job no one slipped up on. I remember how you watched it--"

"Yet the crack has widened, Bob, since the Tube was completed."

"How can you be certain?"

"By the amount of water coming through the drain pipes."

"But you said that once more it was stationary."

"Yes, and that is the very thing that proves, I believe, the nature of the crack."

"I don't follow you."

"Why it isn't a crack at all, Bob. It is an earthquake fault."

"Good heavens, you don't mean--"



"Yes, I do. I mean that the next time the land slips our little tube will be twisted up like a piece of string, or crushed like an eggshell. That always was a rocky bit of land. I thought in going that far north, though, that we had missed the main line of activity; I mean the disturbances that had once wiped out a whole nation, if your scientists are correct."

"Then you mean that it is only a matter of time?"

"Yes, and I have been informed by one expert that the old volcanic activity is not dead either."

"So that is what has stolen away your laugh?"

"Well I am one of the engineers--and they won't suspend the service."

"Fate has played an ugly trick on you, Dutch, and through your own dreams too. However, you have made me decide to go by the Tube."

He took his pipe out of his mouth and stared at me.

"Sooner or later the Tube will be through, and I have never been across. Nothing risked--a dull life. Mine has been altogether too dull. I am now most certainly going by the Tube."

A bit of the old fire lit up his eyes.

"Same old Bob," he grunted as I rose, and then he grasped my hand with a grin.

"Good luck, my boy, on your journey, and may old Vulcan be out on a vacation when you pass his door."

Thus we said good-by. I did not know then that I would never see him again--that he also took the train that night in order to make one last plea to the International Committee, and so laid down his life with the passengers for whom he had pleaded.

It was with many conflicting thoughts, however, that I hurried to the great Terminus that fatal night, where after being ticketed, photographed and tabulated by an efficient army of clerks, I found myself in due time, being ushered to my car of the train.

\* \* \* \* \*

For the benefit of those who have never ridden upon the famous "Flier," I could describe the cars no better than to say that coming upon them by night as I did, they looked like a gigantic, shiny worm, of strange shape, through whose tiny port-holes of heavy glass in the sides, glowed

its luminous vitals.

I was pompously shown to the front car, which very much resembled a tremendous cartridge--as did all of the other segments of this great glow-worm.

Having dismissed the porter with a tip and the suspicion that my having the front car was the work of my friend, who was willing to give me my money's worth of thrill, and that the porter was aware of this, I stowed away my bags and started to get ready for bed. I had no sooner taken off my coat than the door was opened and an old fellow with a mass of silver hair peered in at me.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I understand you have engaged this car alone?"

"Yes."

"I can get no other accommodations tonight. You have an extra berth here and I must get to Paris tomorrow. I will pay you well--"

I smiled.

"Take it. I was beginning to feel lonesome, anyway."

He bowed gravely and ordered the porter to bring in his things. I decided he was a musician. Only artists go in for such lovely hair. But he undressed in dignified silence, not casting so much as another glance in my direction, while on my part I also forgot his presence when, looking through the port-hole, I realized that the train had begun to move. Soon the drone of the propelling engines began to make itself heard. Then the train began to dip down and the steel sides of the entrance became too high for me to see over. My friend of the silver hair had already turned off the light, and now I knew by the darkness that we had entered the Tube. For some time I lay awake thinking of "Dutch" and the ultimate failure of his life's dream, as he had outlined it to me, and then I sank into a deep, dreamless sleep.

I was awakened by a terrible shock that hurled me up against the side of the compartment. A dull, red glow poured through the port-hole, lighting up the interior with a weird, bloody reflection. I crept painfully up to the port-hole and looked out. The strangest sight that man has ever looked upon met my eyes. The side of the wall had blown out into a gigantic cavern, and with it the rest of the cars had rolled down the bluff a tangled, twisted mass of steel. My car had almost passed by, and now it still stuck in the tube, even though the last port-hole through which I peered seemed to be suspended in air. But it was not the wrecked cars from which rose such wails of despair and agony that held my attention, but the cavern itself. For it was not really a cave, but a

vast underground city whose wide, marble streets stretched away to an inferno of flame and lava. By the terrible light was lit up a great white palace with its gold-tipped scrolls, and closer to me, the golden temple of the Sun, with its tiers of lustrous yellow stairs--stairs worn by the feet of many generations.

Above the stairs towered the great statue of a man on horseback. He was dressed in a sort of tunic, and in his uplifted arm he carried a scroll as if for the people to read. His face was turned toward me, and I marveled even in that wild moment that the unknown sculptor could have caught such an expression of appeal. I can see the high intellectual brow as if it were before me at this moment--the level, sympathetic eyes and the firm chin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Then something moving caught my eyes, and I swear I saw a child--a living child coming from the burning city--running madly, breathlessly from a wave of glowing lava that threatened to engulf him at any moment. In spite of all the ridicule that has been showered upon me, I still declare that the child did not come from the wreckage and that he wore a tunic similar to the one of the statue and not the torn bit of a nightgown or sheet.

He was some distance from me, but I could plainly see his expression of wild distraction as he began to climb those gleaming stairs. Strangely lustrous in the weird light, was that worn stairway of gold--gold, the ancient metal of the Sun. With the slowness of one about to faint he dragged himself up, while his breath seemed to be torn from his throat in agonizing gasps. Behind him, the glowing liquid splashed against the steps and the yellow metal of the Sun began to drip into its fiery cauldron.

The child reached the leg of the horse and clung there.

... Then suddenly the whole scene began to shake as if I had been looking at a mirage, while just behind my ear I had a flashing glimpse in that lurid light of an emerald-green deluge bursting in like a dark sky of solid water, and in that split-second before a crushing blow upon my back, even through that tangle of bedclothes, knocked me into unconsciousness, I seemed to hear again the hopeless note in the voice of my friend as he said:

"--an earthquake fault."

After what seemed to me aeons of strange, buzzing noises and peculiar lights, I at last made out the objects around me as those of a hospital. Men with serious faces were watching me. I have since been told that I babbled incoherently about "saving the little fellow" and other equally

incomprehensible murmurings. From them I learned that the train the other way was washed out, a tangled mass of wreckage just like my car, both terminus stations wrecked utterly, and no one found alive except myself. So, although I am to be a hopeless cripple, yet I am not sorry that the skill and untiring patience of the great English surgeon, Dr. Thompson, managed to nurse back the feeble spark of my life through all those weeks that I hung on the borderland; for if he had not, the world never would have known.

As it is, I wonder over the events of that night as if it had not been an experience at all--but a wild weird dream. Even the gentleman with the mass of silver hair is a mystery, for he was never identified, and yet in my mind's recesses I can still hear his cultured voice asking about the extra berth, and mentioning his pressing mission to Paris. And somehow, he gives the last touch of strangeness to the events of that fatal night, and in my mind, he becomes a part of it no less than the child on the stairs, the burning inferno that lit the background, and the great statue of that unknown hero who held out his scroll for a moment in that lurid light, like a symbol from the sunken City of the Dead.

THE END

*Transcriber's Note:*

*This etext was first published in \_Amazing Stories\_ November 1929 and was produced from \_Amazing Stories\_ May 1961. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.*

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## B. C. 30,000

By Capt. S. P. Meek

*Back in the dim dawn of civilization  
Anak the Hunter stands in his might  
before the encroaching Neanderthal  
men.*

A scream of rage split the darkness. From the side of the fire where the women sat darted Esle, the High Priestess, a bloody bit of liver in her hand. Following her, and snarling like an enraged cat, came one of the maidens of the tribe. The aged hag, Esle, whose duty it was to declare to the tribe the will of Degar Astok, the mighty one who dwelt in the heavens and sent the storms to enforce his will, came to a pause before Uglik, the Chief and tribal Father.

"Una was eating of the man's piece," she shrilled as she held the fragment aloft.

Uglik dropped the thigh bone from which he had been ripping the meat in huge chunks. He took the liver from Esle and examined it.

"Bring me my spear!" he roared as he lunged forward and grasped Una by the hair. "Una has stolen that which is tabu to her and I will punish her."

Una moaned with fright but attempted no resistance. Uglik grasped his spear and raised it over his head.

"Hold, Father!" came a clear voice from the group of hunters who sat near the chief.

Uglik paused in amazement at the interruption. Anak, the Chief Hunter, rose to his feet and made a step forward.

"She stole it not," he said. "Anak, the Chief Hunter, gave it to her."

Uglik released the girl and stared at the hunter in surprise. Anak returned the stare coolly and Uglik raised his throwing-spear threateningly. Anak did not let his gaze wander from the Father's, but his grasp tightened ever so slightly on the sharp flint smiting-stone which he had taken from the skin pouch which dangled from his leather waist belt before he had made his announcement.

"Anak, the Chief Hunter, gave it to her," he repeated slowly. "Anak killed the buck, and half of the liver is, by the law of the tribe, his

to dispose of. Does the Father deny the right?"

\* \* \* \*

Uglik lowered the point of his spear and thought rapidly. Anak's act constituted unheard-of rebellion against his authority. On the other hand, the Chief Hunter was the cleverest tracker of the tribe and a mighty warrior in battle. The tribe of Ugar had lost most of its warriors in their long six-month march north from the fertile valley where the Mediterranean Sea now rolls. Uglik was too wise a leader to waste men on a trivial quarrel, able though he felt himself to kill Anak, should the latter cry the rannag, the duel to the death by which the Father must at any time prove to any challenger, his right to rule.

"It is the right of the killer to dispose of half of the liver of the kill," he conceded. "It is also the right of the stronger to take what he wills from the weaker. To Esle belongs the liver. The girl will not be punished. Anak will join me at meat."

Anak's face flushed momentarily at the arrogant tone of the Father's ruling. He realized, as well as Uglik, what had caused the Father to condone his semi-rebellion. He shrugged his shoulders and sat down beside Uglik.

Uglik ate slowly, looking meditatively at Una as she tore off chunks of the meat with her strong teeth and swallowed them. The girl was about eighteen and in the first flush of womanhood. Her tawny brown skin gleamed like satin in the firelight, which was reflected from her slightly curling masses of black hair. She stood eight inches over five feet and her entire body was built on generous lines, lines of perfect health and almost masculine strength. Anak's eyes followed the direction of Uglik's gaze and he grew thoughtful in turn.

"Is the Father satisfied with the Chief Hunter?" he asked ceremoniously.

"The Father is," replied Uglik in similar vein.

"Then the Chief Hunter has a boon to ask."

"Name it."

"I desire that maiden, Una, be given to me."

"What?"

Uglik could hardly believe his ears. All of the women of the tribe belonged of immemorial right to the Father. While he might lend one for a time to a favored hunter as a mark of distinction, the suggestion that he completely relinquish his claim to one of them, and a young and

handsome one at that, struck him with such astonishment that he was momentarily speechless.

"I desire that the maiden, Una, be given to me," repeated Anak. "She pleases me. I would have her carry my weapons on the march and sleep by my side in the camp."

\* \* \* \*

Uglik leaped to his feet, spear in hand, but before the Chief Hunter's cool gaze, he wavered, again. Men were too scarce to waste, unless it became necessary.

"I will consider the matter," he said shortly. "I may lend her to you for a time, but I will not give her to you. Such is not the law."

"The Father who ruled before you gave women to his favored hunters," replied Anak. "I was the son of such a one."

"And Degar Astok assumed the form of a lion and punished him for his impiety by destroying him," retorted Uglik.

"Then Uglik killed the lion and so became Father," replied Anak, "since none dared challenge the slayer of Degar Astok. Is it not possible that Esle, who was young and who favored Uglik in those days, made a mistake? Despite his death, Degar Astok still has power."

Uglik's face flushed at the hunter's words.

"Degar Astok may be robbed of one body, but he still lives," he answered. "Say no more. I will consider your request."

Anak saluted and strode to the other side of the men's fire. He dropped down beside Invar, the youngest of the hunters. It was on his recommendation that Invar had been initiated into the ranks of manhood a full season before his time. The young hunter looked up with adoration in his eyes.

"This I saved for my friend, Anak," he said proudly as he extended a generous chunk of liver. "Invar will be honored if his friend will eat of the liver of his kill."

Anak took the morsel with thanks and ate it slowly. His thoughts ran to the tall maiden whom he had requested from the Father, and his blood boiled at the way he had been put off. He was half inclined to cry the rannag, but he was not yet ready for the death duel which would determine whether he or Uglik would rule the tribe. There was no other solution, for, while he ruled, the Father's word was law, subject only to the higher law of Degar Astok as given out by the High Priestess.

This overlordship was more nominal than actual, for those priestesses who lived long lives were invariably those who found that the will of the Father coincided exactly with the law of Degar Astok. Anak revolved the problem in his mind for a time, but the repletion of raw meat in his stomach was not conducive to protracted thought. Gradually his head slumped forward and he slept sitting. The other hunters followed his example, leaving the youths from ten to seventeen to guard the camp, keep the fires going, and rouse the hunters should need arise.

\* \* \* \* \*

The night passed slowly without alarms. Womoo, the lion, roared in the distance, and from near at hand came the coughing laugh of Kena, the jackal, who always prowled around the camp when the tribe fed on meat. Gradually the sky grew lighter. One of the children moaned in his sleep and raised his head. He rose, and with a word to the youth on guard, trotted off toward the stream which gurgled near the camp. He disappeared in the darkness. Suddenly there came a sudden scream, shut off in mid-note. Hardly had the cry ceased than the hunters were on their feet with spears ready in their hands.

"What is it?" cried Uglik.

"Loda went to the stream to drink," stuttered the guard. "He screamed, and I saw a gray shape run off into the darkness. It ran like Grup, the bear, but it was small."

"Bring fire!" cried Anak.

The youth seized a burning brand and led the way toward the stream. By the light of the torch Anak scrutinized the ground carefully. With a sudden exclamation, he pointed out to Uglik the print of a long and narrow, but unmistakably human, foot in the mud by the river bank. Uglik studied it carefully.

"What think you?" he demanded of Anak.

"It is the mark of man, yet not of our tribe," replied the Chief Hunter. "Such marks have I never seen."

"Wait until Degar Astok sends the light," directed Uglik. "As soon as you can trail, the hunters will go in pursuit."

\* \* \* \* \*

Slowly the light grew brighter. As soon as he could pick out the trail, Anak led the way, Uglik with the warriors and youths following closely. The trail led straight up the valley for a half mile before it turned and followed a branch of the stream which came from a ravine in the



valley wall. The hunters went a hundred yards up the ravine following Anak. The Chief Hunter paused and held up his hand. He sniffed the air and then led the way cautiously past a projecting shoulder of rock. On a ledge, half way up the hillside, sat two monstrous things.

They were manlike and yet hardly man. Their bodies were covered with stiff, coarse, gray hair which lengthened into a mane on the head and neck. Their foreheads were low and receding, an impression which was heightened by the enormously developed brow ridges, although the cranial capacity of the creatures was not small, as was evidenced by enormous bulges at the back of their heads. They walked on two legs but with a peculiar slouch, the torso inclined forward from the hips, and their eyes bent perpetually on the ground. Their arms were long and at times they bent forward so much that it appeared almost as though they were going on all fours. A close examination of their hands would have shown that it was impossible for them to hold a needle between the thumb and forefinger.

"Gumor, the gray ape!" cried one of the hunters.

"It is not Gumor," replied Anak, "although they are like his cousins. See what they eat!"

As the hunters of the Cro-Magnon tribe of Ugar saw the meat which the Neanderthals were tearing, a cry of wrath broke from them. Uglik stepped forward and raised the war cry of the tribe. The Neanderthals looked stupidly down at him for a moment. The huge male dropped the meat he was eating and rose, his mane and beard bristling with rage. With a roar, he charged down the slope, a huge flint smiting-stone in either hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

The hunters closed up on Uglik. As the attacker came within range, he was saluted with a shower of stones which sprang harmlessly from his huge rounded chest. Uglik hurled his spear. It pierced the apeman's shoulder but did not make him pause. Other spears were hurled and struck their mark, but without a pause the Neanderthaler came on with howls of rage and pain, bloody froth flying from his lips.

Anak had not thrown his spear, and Invar, who stood beside his hero, had likewise retained his weapon. The apeman came on with a rush. Uglik sprang forward to meet him, but another hunter was directly in the path of the attack. He swung his flint smiting-stone with a will, but his blow was futile. He went down before a sweep of the apeman's arm, his skull crushed to fragments.

Uglik struck at the attacker. The Neanderthaler turned toward him, but as he did so, Anak hurled his spear. At close range, the stone-tipped

weapon passed nearly through the apeman. He stopped his rush and began to cough up blood from a pierced lung. Anak seized Invar's spear and sprang to the attack. An unfledged youth who craved distinction, rushed ahead of the Chief Hunter, but his act spelled his doom. One blow of the huge smiting-stone laid him dead. Anak hurled Invar's spear and again his weapon found its mark. The Neanderthaler roared with pain and sank gradually to his knees. Uglik dashed in, knife in hand. He threw himself on the prostrate monster and stabbed him again and again. The blows struck home, but with a last effort the apeman threw off his assailant and struck at him with the huge stone which had already robbed the tribe of two of its members. Before the blow could fall, Samo, one of the hunters, threw himself in the way and took the blow on his arm. The arm bone snapped like a pipestem, but it was the monster's dying effort. With a shudder, he fell back dead.

\* \* \* \* \*

A ferocious howl rent the air. With a smiting-stone in each hand, the female charged down at them. She was somewhat smaller than the male, but still a match for any two of the men. Uglik's face paled as he wrenched Invar's spear from the dead male and turned to face her. The howl was repeated from farther up the ravine. Two more males were approaching at a lumbering run, smiting-stones in either hand. Uglik was a brave man, but he was also a cautious leader. He did not care to expose his tribe to almost certain annihilation and he led a wild retreat down the valley, Samo, with his arm hanging limp, bringing up the rear. The Neanderthalers did not follow into the open valley.

Again at the camping place, Uglik called his hunters into council. The situation was grave enough. With the Neanderthalers so near them, it meant eventual annihilation to stay where they were, yet there was no place they could go. They had been driven from their old home by hordes of men who came up from the south. They had fought to retain their ancestral hunting grounds where they had dwelt since the beginning of time, but a series of defeats at the hands of overwhelming numbers had dwindled down the tribe until a migration was necessary. They had followed the migrating game toward the unknown north.

Several times they had tried to stop, but each time they had found the land in possession of other and stronger tribes. Their men had been killed and their women stolen until they again took up their march to the north. From the hundred that had formerly called Uglik "Father," there now remained only a score of women and children, a half dozen youths, and five able-bodied hunters, besides Uglik.

South, they dared not go. North, there lay unknown horrors. West lay the raging sea. East, the Neanderthalers blocked the way.

\* \* \* \* \*

The council broke up with no action decided on. Faced with the alternatives of moving or staying, there seemed to be little choice. Only death faced them, whichever way they turned. Uglik posted guards about the camp and announced that he would retire and consult with Degar Astok as to their future course.

As he disappeared into the woods, Esle sidled up to Anak.

"It seems that Degar Astok no longer loves Uglik," she said slyly. "Does not the Chief Hunter agree with me?"

Anak looked at the withered hag coldly.

"Who am I to tell his Priestess whom Degar Astok loves?" he asked. "You are his voice and should know."

"True, Anak, I am his voice, and the God loves me," she went on, "yet it may be that men do not always love me. Uglik thinks that I have given him false counsel and he is ready for a new Priestess to announce the will of Degar Astok to him. He believes that a new and younger Priestess would bring back the favor of the God."

"What is that to me?" asked Anak.

"You desire the maiden, Una?"

"And if I do?"

"You are not to have her. Uglik will never grant your request. Already he plans to make her the High Priestess, should an accident happen to me."

Anak started. If Esle spoke the truth, it ended his chances of having Una. All women were tabu to all save the Father, but the High Priestess was doubly sacred.

"What am I to do?" he demanded.

Esle smiled slyly.

"I was the Voice of the God before Uglik was Father," she said in a low voice, "and I would be so after he is gone. Cry you rannag on him. I know many things, and I will cast a spell on him so that victory will be easy for you. Then will you be Father. The maiden Una will be yours, and old Esle will remain the High Priestess."

"To give me false counsel as you have Uglik, and in time to plot my overthrow and death with another," said Anak sternly. "No, woman or

devil, whichever you are, I want no help of yours. If I ever cry rannag on Uglik, I will defeat him by my strength or not at all. If I win to be Father, be assured that an 'accident' will happen to you shortly."

\* \* \* \* \*

Esle frothed at the mouth with rage.

"You shall never have the maiden!" she screamed. "Rather will I kill her than that you shall have her. It was in my mind to make you Chief and to lead you from this trap that Uglik had brought you into, but you have sealed your doom and hers. I go to prepare a curse."

She turned to depart, but Anak grasped her by the arm.

"Listen, woman," he said sternly as he raised his spear, "it is in my mind to kill you and make an end of your evil plottings."

"Spare me! Spare me, noble Anak!" shrieked the hag, dropping to her knees as the flint point of Anak's spear hovered over her. "I will not harm her nor you, either. I will soften Uglik's heart toward you and make him give you the maiden. I will declare it is the will of the God."

Anak lowered the spear.

"As long as Una is safe, your life is spared," he said grimly; "but pray to Degar Astok to keep her safe. Should any harm befall her, your life will answer for it."

"I will weave spells to guard her from harm, Anak," she cried eagerly. "Only let me live, brave hunter!"

Anak spurned her contemptuously from him. The hag scuttled away and took the path into the woods which Uglik had taken earlier. Later in the day she returned with the Father. Uglik announced briefly that it was the will of Degar Astok that they remain at their present camping place.

\* \* \* \* \*

Then began a time of horror for the children of the tribe. If one of them strayed for even a short distance from the circle of the camp fire at night, there came a scream from the darkness and the tribe would mourn another lost member. The tales of man-eating giants and ogres which even yet haunt the dreams of childhood have descended to us through the ages from those grim times when the race of men learned the lesson of fear of the dark that they are now slowly and painfully unlearning.

Anak did not renew his request for Una. He knew from her smiles that the

maiden was more than willing to become his property, but in the face of their daily peril, he was not willing to precipitate a crisis which might easily cost the tribe most or all of their few remaining warriors. He kept a sharp watch on Esle and on Uglik, but neither the High Priestess nor the Father seemed to notice the girl.

As time went on, the Neanderthalers lost their fear of the fire and grew bolder. Their gray shapes could be seen prowling around at night, just outside the protecting circle of light. The climax came at last. There was a scream in the night. A howl of triumph came from the darkness. The quickly aroused hunters could see nothing at which to cast their spears.

"Who is missing?" demanded Uglik as the hunters returned empty handed.

"The maiden, Una," cried Esle shrilly.

Anak rushed at her, spear in hand.

"Unsay those words, hag of evil omen!" he roared. "Where have you hidden her?"

"Ask of the cousins of Gumor," she replied as she ducked behind the protecting frame of Uglik. "They have taken her from us."

Anak dropped his spear and buried his face in his hands. When he raised his head again, resolution showed in his handsome face.

"Prepare spears and throwing-stones," he cried. "To-morrow we attack the cousins of Gumor. Either they or we shall be no more when the night falls again."

A murmur of dissent went around the camp. Uglik sprang to his feet.

"What means the Chief Hunter of the tribe of Ugar?" he demanded.

"I mean that to-morrow we settle for all time who rules in this valley, the tribe of Ugar or the cousins of Gumor."

"And has the Father no voice in the council of the tribe?"

"We have come to the end," replied Anak. "If we do not strike now, soon we will be too weak to strike. To-morrow we attack!"

"I am Father of the tribe of Ugar," replied Uglik with a dangerous note in his voice. "No one gives orders here except me. On you, Anak, the Chief Hunter that was, I place the word of death! Slay him!"

The hunters raised their spears doubtfully. Anak raised his, ready to

cast it at Uglik. Before a blow could be struck, a figure sprang across the fire and took a stand, back to back with Anak.

"Who strikes my friend, strikes me!" cried Invar.

\* \* \* \* \*

Uglik gave a gasp at this fresh defection from his authority. He roared to the hunters to strike. The three hunters remaining to the tribe advanced half-heartedly. None of them cared to face Anak; and Invar, young as he was, had already proven himself a mighty warrior. Uglik shouldered them aside with a roar of wrath. Before he could attack, Anak's cry stopped him.

"Hold, Uglik!" cried the Chief Hunter. "If you attack, the tribe will lose most or all of its hunters. You have put the death word on me, as is your right. I go now against the cousins of Gumor, and that, I think, is death. Let me go in peace and with weapons. Before they tear me limb from limb, at least one of them will not be alive."

"And I go with Anak!" cried Invar. "More than one of the cousins of Gumor will know that the Chief Hunter of the tribe of Ugar and his friend have visited their home."

Uglik paused. No trace of fear entered his heart, but the wily politician saw the force of Anak's argument. He would gain doubly by the course that the hunter had proposed.

"Go in peace, and with weapons," he said as he lowered his spear. "Esle will take your weapons and make spells over them that will increase their might. At dawn you shall go. The word of death is on you, so come not back to the tribe again. Once you leave the camp, you are outlaw."

"So be it!" replied Anak.

Shortly before the dawn, Esle crept to Anak's side.

"I've wrought spells over your weapons, Chief Hunter," she said softly, "and over those of your companion. Remember this when the cousins of Gumor attack you."

"I will, hag of evil," said Anak grimly. "Better will it be for you that we never return."

"Why leave?" came Esle's insinuating voice. "I am still ready to help you. Cry rannag on Uglik in the morning. Your weapons have had my attention and his have not. That alone would decide the fight. Slay him and the warriors of the tribe will fight at your back. I know spells, and mayhap, they will prevail even against the cousins of Gumor."

"I go but for vengeance, Esle," said Anak wearily. "With Una gone, I have no desire to live."

"There are other maidens who are fair, Anak, and when you are Father you will have them all."

"Leave me, Esle," said Anak shortly. "I desire none but Una."

"And may the cousins of Gumor crack your bones between their teeth," she hissed venomously as she slipped away into the darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the sun rose above the horizon, Anak and Invar took their way up the valley. Each carried three flint-tipped throwing-spears, while a good supply of flint throwing-stones were in their skin pouches. Half a mile from camp, Anak turned to his companion.

"I thank you for coming with me," he said, his hand on Invar's shoulder. "It is the deed of a brave man."

Invar flushed and looked down.

"The least that I can do is to go to Degar Astok with my friend," he said.

"It is the deed of a brave man, yet I think we are not yet ripe to die."

"We go against the cousins of Gumor, do we not?" asked the lad.

"We do."

"And is that not death?"

"Mayhap, and yet, I have a plan. We may live."

"How can we two expect to do what all the tribe of Ugar dare not try?"

"The tribe of Ugar, or a dozen tribes of Ugar, could not conquer with Uglik leading them," replied Anak, "yet we two may do so. Hark now to my plan. Like Gumor, the gray ape, his cousins walk ever with their eyes cast down. While we have been hunting, I have been spying on them in their home. Never have I seen one look up, and it may be that they cannot. Above or on a level with us, they can easily kill us. If we stand on the rocks above them, they cannot see us and will be at our mercy. They can run as fast as we on level ground, but going uphill, we will leave them as Guno, the deer, leaves Kena. They are few in number; I have watched and seen but two hunters and three females. It is my plan

to scale the cliffs and watch them below us. When the time is ripe, we will launch our throwing-spears. If we fail to make a kill, we will bound up the hill and escape to strike again."

Invar looked with admiration at his leader. The habit of connected thought and reasoning was new in the world in those days. Such boldness of conception as was shown by Anak's plan was a thing for marvel. As the ramifications of the plan seeped into Invar's brain, his face glowed with enthusiasm.

"Anak should be Father of the tribe of Ugar!" he cried.

"That may yet come to pass," replied Anak enigmatically. "If I kill Uglik, however, it will be to avenge Una, not to win the chieftainship. Now keep silence, for here is the home of the cousins of Gumor."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cautiously the two hunters passed the mouth of the ravine and climbed the slopes of the valley. Once on the level ground, they moved to the edge of the ravine and looked down into it. Nothing could be seen moving. Anak led the way a hundred yards farther up the ravine.

"Below us is a cave where dwell two," he whispered. "Make ready your spear while I sound the challenge."

He raised his voice in a wild howl of challenge. For a moment there was silence. Then from the ravine came a hoarse rumbling bellow. An enormous male made his appearance, his mane and beard bristling with rage. He darted his eyes hither and thither, seeking the source of the challenge. Again a hoarse roar came from his broad, thick lips. As it rose to a crescendo, Anak hurled his spear.

His aim was true. The point struck the Neanderthaler at the junction of his neck and shoulder. As it struck, the haft flew from the spear and bounded down the slope. The first point made only a surface wound.

The apeman roared with pain and rage. Still he did not see his enemies. With careful aim, Invar launched his weapon. The stone-tipped spear struck the giant's groin, but the haft broke and the head was barely buried in the flesh. The Neanderthaler pricked up his pointed, lobeless ears, and located the source of the shout. By bending back his torso, he looked upward. With a roar of rage he started up the slope, a huge flint smiting-stone grasped in each hairy paw.

Anak and Invar dashed up the slope ahead of him. The keenness of the Chief Hunter's powers of observation was attested by the fact that they easily increased their distance from their pursuer. As they ran, Invar's foot dislodged a boulder which thundered down the slope. The



Neanderthaler did not see it coming until it was too late to dodge. The stone took him full in the chest and he rolled down the slope, a shower of smaller stones going with him.

He smashed against a tree. With shouts of triumph, Anak and Invar bounded down the slope. The Neanderthaler was dying, his chest crushed in. Invar raised a spear and drove it at his heart. The weapon struck fair, but again the head of the spear came off the shaft. A sudden thought illuminated Anak's brain.

"Esle!" he cried in rage. "She had our weapons last night!"

\* \* \* \* \*

He studied the two spears remaining in his hand. Each of them had the hide lashing which bound the head to the haft cut through. The weapons were useless.

Invar's face paled. From up the slope a roar assailed their ears. The female was rushing down at them, smiting-stones in hand.

"Fly, Invar!" cried Anak. "Run up the slope and throw down stones at her. I will hold her for a moment."

"Invar stays with his friend!" cried the boy stubbornly as he gripped his useless throwing-spear.

"Run up the slope!" stormed Anak. "It is our only chance. Remember how the male died!"

Slowly the idea penetrated Invar's brain. With a shout he dashed away. He circled the oncoming female and got above her. Anak hurled one of his crippled spears. It struck her full in the chest, but made only a flesh wound as the handle dropped away. The female roared with rage and hurled herself at the hunter. Anak leaped to one side and ran for dear life. The clumsy female checked her rush and turned after him. He rapidly gained on her. A shout from above reached him.

"Run to your left, Anak!"

The hunter swerved sharply to his left. Invar threw his shoulder against a huge boulder on the slope. The stone rocked but did not fall. Again the lad exerted himself until his muscles cracked under the strain. The boulder tottered for a moment and then rolled down the slope, gathering momentum as it rolled. It was deflected from the direct line of the female's attack, but a smaller stone it dislodged struck her on the shoulder and knocked her from her feet.

"More stones, Invar!" cried Anak.

\* \* \* \*

The two exerted themselves and an avalanche of rocks thundered down the slope. The female strove to rise, but she was overwhelmed. Down the slope rushed the two hunters, intent on finishing her with their smiting-stones and knives. She lay in a twisted heap, whimpering plaintively. Invar's knife found her heart, and she sank back dead.

"Well struck, Invar!" cried Anak. "Would that we had spears. Others of the cousins of Gumor are coming."

Bellowing roars came from higher up the ravine. The two hunters bounded back up the slope. Down the ravine came another female, followed by a fourteen-year-old boy. Contemptuous of their assailants, the hunters betrayed their whereabouts with shouts. The female accepted the challenge and climbed heavily up the slope toward them, the boy trailing her and aping her cries with shrill shouts.

The hunters allowed her to approach to within a few yards before they threw their combined weight on a huge mass of rock. The boulder gave and thundered down the slope. It brushed past the female but did not strike her.

"Higher up and try again, Invar!" cried the Chief Hunter.

They bounded up the slope. Anak paused and hurled a flint throwing-stone with deadly aim. It struck the female a glancing blow on the face, tearing the flesh from one of the prominent brow ridges. She stopped, momentarily blinded. Invar raised a rock high above his head with both hands and cast it at her. It struck her on the chest and she fell backwards. Again Anak's strategy was successful and an avalanche of rolled rocks overwhelmed her. The boy turned to fly, but the fleet-footed Invar overtook him and the knives of the two hunters quickly put an end to his career.

As they bent over his dead body, a shrill scream rose on the air. It was not the voice of an apeman, or an apewoman, but held a human quality. The hunters straightened up and sought the source of it. Again came the scream. From the mouth of a cave above them bounded a girl. She won momentarily to freedom, but a huge Neanderthal male followed her from the cave. His hairy arm seized and dragged her back.

"Una!" cried Invar and Anak in one voice.

\* \* \* \*

Forgotten were strategy and tactics. Anak bounded up the slope, Invar at his heels. Into the mouth of the cave they charged. The huge male

dropped the girl and faced them with a growl. Anak hurled a throwing-stone, but his aim was poor. It rebounded harmlessly from the great arched chest of the Neanderthaler. With a roar, the apeman charged.

The hunter sidestepped the rush and swung his smiting-stone. The blow was deflected by the upraised arm of the apeman and fell on his shoulder. Invar hurled a throwing-stone which found the monster's face and made him pause. The apeman recovered himself and rushed at the youth. The boy met him, smiting-stone in hand, but one swing of the heavier flint broke through his guard and stretched him senseless on the floor, blood flowing from a gash in his head.

Anak hurled another throwing-stone which caught the apeman on the back of the head, dazing him. With a shout, Anak closed. The effects of the blow had been only momentary and the Neanderthaler met his rush with both his stones swinging. One of them tore a long gash down Anak's back while the other laid open his thigh. The apeman dropped his stones and wound his long hairy arms about the hunter's body. Anak threw himself back and the two rolled on the floor, the apeman striving to crush the life out of his slighter opponent, while Anak smote futilely with his smiting-stone at the hairy body. Slowly, the hunter's ribs gave under the pressure. Spots of fire danced before his eyes. He strove valiantly, but his muscles were as a child's, compared to the enormous development of his opponent. With a gasp, his body went limp.

\* \* \* \* \*

Una had watched the struggle with horror-stricken eyes. As the apeman's grip tightened about Anak's body, she gave a low moan. Her gaze fell on the discarded smiting-stones of the Neanderthaler. She sprang forward and lifted one in both hands. The apeman threw back his head to give a roar of victory. The note never issued from his throat. The huge flint which he had chipped patiently to a sharp edge, struck him on the back of the head. With a gasp and a convulsive shudder, the apeman rolled over, his skull crushed in.

Invar slowly recovered consciousness, and now sat up. He looked dully at the dead body of the Neanderthaler. Beside it, Anak lay in a pool of blood. He staggered to his feet, asking dully:

"Is Anak with Degar Astok?"

"Not yet," replied Una. "Help me to stop the flow of his blood."

"He said there were five of the cousins of Gumor," said the boy as he looked around apprehensively. "We have slain but four."

Una pointed toward the ravine.

"The other lies there," she said. "This one slew his mate an hour gone. I think he designed me to take her place."

Fever took Anak, and for three days he hovered between life and death. Then he slept and woke conscious, although his strength was badly sapped by the fever. There was no lack of food, for game was plentiful and Invar had found and mended the throwing-spears which Esle had tampered with. Slowly Anak recovered his strength. A month after the fight he stretched his muscles and announced himself as well.

"I return to-day to the tribe of Ugar," he announced.

"Can you return?" asked Invar doubtfully. "Remember the word of death."

"That, let Uglik answer," replied Anak. "In peace or in war, I will return. Soon the winter will come and here are warm caves and game in plenty. Here shall the tribe make a home."

"Where you go, there go I," exclaimed Invar.

"And I likewise," said Una.

"Una will stay here until we return," replied Anak in a tone which brooked no argument.

\* \* \* \* \*

The girl pouted, but a sharp word from Anak settled the matter. Throwing-spear and smiting-stone in hand, the two hunters approached the camping place of Uglik's tribe. They were within a hundred yards before they were seen. Esle set up a shrill cry.

"Here come those on whom the Father passed the death word. Slay, oh, hunters!"

Anak raised his hand and made the sign of peace.

"Wait before you attack two such as we," he said. "We are bearers of good tidings. By our hands, the cousins of Gumor have died. Think you, do you care to attack two such as we?"

The hunters looked at one another doubtfully.

"He lies!" shrilled Esle.

"We do not lie!" retorted Anak. "Their bones, picked clear by Kena, lie in their ravine. We come in peace to lead you to their home. There are warm caves and game in plenty. We will rejoin the tribe if the Father

will remove the death word. Otherwise, attack us if you dare, and the tribe of Ugar will join the cousins of Gumor."

Uglik's face plainly showed hesitation.

"The death word has been passed," he said doubtfully. "It can be withdrawn only by a sacrifice to Degar Astok."

"We two have offered five of the cousins of Gumor, and a boy. Is that not enough?"

"It must be a human sacrifice!" cried Esle.

"Then, hag of evil omen, traitor to Uglik, attempted slayer of Invar and me, I offer you!" cried Anak furiously, his spear raised.

"Sacrilege!" she shrilled, darting behind Uglik. "Slay the defamer of the God!"

"What mean these charges, Anak?" asked Uglik darkly.

"Esle tampered with our spears, which you ordered her to strengthen for the battle with the cousins of Gumor," said Anak. "They broke in our hands. With only smiting-stones and knives, we overcame them. Further, she tried to plot with me to kill you and take your place."

"He lies!" cried Esle in a quavering voice. Uglik turned a black face on her.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Enough!" he roared. "The sacrifice is sufficient. I withdraw the death word. Anak, the cause of dissension between us is gone. Rejoin the tribe in peace."

"I bow to the Father," replied Anak, suiting his action to his word.

"The tribe of Ugar has gained three members."

"Three?" asked Uglik.

"The maiden, Una, was not slain, but borne away alive by the cousins of Gumor. I have rescued her and she waits in the valley of plenty."

"Then Degar Astok was right when he told me he should have a new High Priestess," said Uglik, licking his lips. "She shall come to my cave and take the place of that worn-out hag, Esle."

"She will dwell in mine," said Anak shortly. "I have taken her for mine and I will not give her up."

"The word of the Father is the law of the tribe," said Uglik.

"That is true. I ask that the maiden whom I have taken in war be given to me in peace."

"The maiden, Una, dwells in the Father's cave!" said Uglik.

"Then cry I rannag on you, Uglik, the Father!" cried Anak. "I challenge you to the fight to death, which you may not refuse and continue to rule."

"And on you I pass the death word!" shouted Uglik. "Hunters--"

"The Father may not pass the death word on one who has cried rannag," retorted Anak. "Such is the law!"

"Such is the law!" echoed the hunters, glad of an excuse not to attack the two hunters of whose prowess they knew so much.

Uglik looked from one group to the other.

"When the sun starts to rest, the rannag will be fought," he answered.

"When I have slain this traitor, Una becomes High Priestess. Hunters, bind the hag, Esle, that she may not escape. Anak, lead the way to the valley of plenty."

\* \* \* \* \*

Packing up was a simple matter for the tribe of Ugar. In five minutes they were following Anak to the valley of the Neanderthals. When they arrived, Uglik picked out the largest of the caves, and told the hunters to choose their own. In a few minutes the tribe was established in their new home. Esle was released from her bonds, for it was essential that the High Priestess of Degar Astok prepare the ground for the rannag.

Anak and Invar walked slowly up to the cave where Una waited.

"Uglik is a mighty warrior," said Invar doubtfully.

"So is Anak," was the reply. "Further, I have a plan."

"Then are Uglik's days numbered," replied Invar with delight. "Tell me what I am to do to aid you."

"When we get to the cave, you may cut off my hair and beard."

Invar started back aghast.

"Your strength will go with it," he protested. "The glory of the warrior is his beard."

"I do not believe it," said Anak. "By cutting it, I will rob Uglik of a handhold he could use to my downfall. Fear not, I know what I am doing."

With a flint knife, Invar slowly and painfully hacked off Anak's long hair and beard. When the operation was over, Anak smeared himself plentifully with the fat of a wild pig which had fallen to one of Invar's spears the day before. When he was ready, he threw himself down to sleep. When he had dropped off to slumber, Una rose. She took the liver of the pig from the back of the cave and approached the doorway.

"Where go you, Una?" demanded Invar.

"I take this to the Father that he may strengthen himself for the rannag," she said enigmatically. "Should not the best be given to the Father?"

Invar's hand tightened on his throwing-spear.

"Minded am I to slay you," he said darkly.

"And fight to the death with Anak when he awakens? Listen, oh, fool, if the Father eats greatly, he will be slow and Anak may slay him with ease."

A light of admiration flashed into Invar's eyes.

"It is well thought," he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

With a swift glance around, Una took from her girdle a tiny skin packet. She opened it and displayed a brown powder.

"This, Esle gave me," she whispered. "She said that Uglik had threatened her death and she wished Anak to kill him. If I give Anak this, Degar Astok would make him strong."

"Why did you not do so?"

"Because I am a woman, and I know a woman's heart. It would have the opposite effect. I will rub it into the liver I give to Uglik."

With the aid of the women, Esle laid out a rough oval on the ground where the two combatants were to meet. Throwing-stones and spears were not allowed in rannag, the two combatants fighting their duel with smiting-stones and flint knives only. At the appointed hour, the two

combatants appeared, stripped to their loin-clothes only. The Father was hideous with streaks of paint, red, yellow, white, and black. Anak glistened from his coat of grease, but his skin was bare of ornament.

The two combatants took their places, while around the fighting ground gathered the hunters and youths, throwing-spears in hand. Their privilege and duty it was to slay either of the fighters who fled or who was forced out of the ring. Esle intoned a long prayer to Degar Astok. The word for combat was given. The two men approached each other cautiously. The Father confident in his strength, but he felt heavy and lethargic. Anak was clear-eyed and alert, ready to take advantage of any opening offered him.

The two men circled, wary as great jungle cats. Anak, suddenly ducked his head and rubbed his eyes. With a roar of triumph, Uglik charged.

Outside the ring, there was a commotion. A woman's scream, rent the air. Invar leaped to Una's side, to find her wrestling with Esle.

"Kill her, Invar!" shrieked the girl. "She tried to cast a spell on Anak."

The young hunter forced open the High Priestess' hand. In it was grasped a bit of shiny quartz with which she had reflected the sun into the hunter's eyes. With upraised hand, he struck her to the ground.

"She shall be judged after the rannag," he said. "Take you this spear, Una, and drive it through her if she moves."

The girl took the spear. Invar returned to watch the fight. Anak had sidestepped the first rush of the Father and his smiting-stone had bit heavily into Uglik's shoulder. Uglik had whirled and charged again. Anak made as if to leap to one side. As Uglik changed his direction to meet him, Anak swayed back. Again his smiting-stone bit heavily into the Father's side. With a cry of pain, Uglik paused and changed his tactics. He approached cautiously, ready to leap to either side. Farther and farther Anak retreated until the hunters at the end of the oval raised their spears in anticipation. Then Anak charged.

Uglik was taken by surprise. His blow glanced off Anak's upraised stone while an upward sweep of the weapon took him in the neck. He dropped his stone and threw his arms around Anak's body. Well had Anak planned when he greased his body, for Uglik's grip failed. Anak shook him loose and struck again. Once more Uglik grasped him, and this time threw him heavily to the ground. Again the grease made his hold slip. Anak struggled to his feet, but it was evident that the fall had hurt him.

\* \* \* \*



Uglik followed up his advantage. He warded off the blow of the hunter's stone and again flung him to earth. Anak dropped his stone.

Uglik's hands fastened on the hunter's throat, and mercilessly he banged Anak's head on the rocky ground. Anak wound his mighty legs about the Father's middle. Silently they put forth their strength. Uglik's hold was the more deadly, and slowly the hunter weakened.

"The Father kills!" screamed Esle.

She strove to rise to her feet, but Una had her orders from Invar. She pressed home the spear. With a sob, Esle fell back.

Anak's tongue began to protrude from his mouth and his eyes swelled. An expression of triumph spread over Uglik's face, which suddenly changed to one of amazement, and then to pain and fear.

As they rolled over, Anak had felt something pierce his leg. The pain was nothing, but it persisted. As his consciousness slipped away, only that one feeling remained. He reached down to his leg. Thrust deep into his thigh was a knife-like sliver of flint. With a supreme effort, he rallied his failing consciousness and grasped it. The Father's chest was directly over him. With his last conscious effort, he thrust upward with the fragment of flint. His aim was true. Uglik suddenly released his hold and raised himself to his knees, his hands plucking at his chest. For a moment he swayed forward and back. Then, with a cry, he pitched forward, blood gushing from his chest over the unconscious hunter.

\* \* \* \* \*

Anak recovered consciousness to find his opponent lying dead before him, the sliver of flint buried in his heart. He staggered to his feet and tried to speak. His vocal cords refused to act and he massaged his throat gently.

"I am Father of the tribe of Ugar by right of rannag," he said hoarsely. "Do any challenge the right?"

There was no answer. Anak stepped to Una's side.

"Uglik spoke truth when he said that Una would be High Priestess of Degar Astok," he said. "This I now proclaim her. You, Esle, stripped of your office, shall do menial tasks for all who will until death claims you. If your homage wavers, death will not be long.

"Lo, I make a new law for the tribe. No longer shall all the women belong to the Father, but to those to whom the Father awards them. To each hunter, I now give one woman. He shall take her to his cave and hunt for her. She shall obey him and no other. The others shall live in

a woman's cave, and shall be tabu until they are chosen by one who has no woman, or until a hunter desires more than one woman to chip his flints and dress his skins. Hunters, choose your women and take up caves. Here stays the tribe of Ugar forever, and we will allow no others in the valley."

Followed by Una he strode toward the Father's cave. Below the hunters and the women eyed one another a trifle fearfully. At last Invar stepped forward and grasped one of them by the arm.

"Come to my cave!" he ordered.

The woman followed him submissively.

*Transcriber's Note:*

*This etext was produced from \_Astounding Stories\_ April 1932. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.*

End of the Project Gutenberg EBook of B. C. 30,000, by Sterner St. Paul Meek

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## OLD SHAG

By Bob Farnham

*\_There's no knowing what a man can  
do until the chips are down--especially  
with a helper like the shaggy man!\_*

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from  
Worlds of If Science Fiction, March 1960.  
Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that  
the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

Maybe a guy shouldn't believe everything he hears, but the trouble with some people is that they don't even believe a true story. Let me buy you a beer and tell you about it.

After working some years in the baggage room of the local depot, I decided to transfer to the train service, and made application for it. The application was approved. I was sent to the city offices for the course of study and training which all trainmen undergo, and after a time I was sent out as brakeman on a freight. I stayed for a year and a half. Then I succeeded in being assigned as head brakeman on a fast food special called The Red Ball Special. It made no stop between Chicago and New York except for water and fuel. The big Diesel in which I rode as head brakie was a high-speed locomotive, used exclusively for hauling the food special.

Our first stop was Detroit, where we cut off all but three cars, and took on five more scheduled in New York at 9 the next morning. In New York, I strolled along Broadway, gawking at the sights exactly like any other yokel.

After a twelve-hour rest, the return trip began. I stood in my place in the big Diesel till we had cleared for the main line, and then settled back to enjoy the ride.

It was close to midnight. I sat at the cab window half asleep, my senses somewhat dulled by the steady rhythm of train movement. I'd finished an extra good cigar and had started to doze off when the engineer gave a low moan and toppled from his seat to the floor of the cab.

The fireman, much against the rules, but feeling safe with the engineer and myself to watch in his place, had gone back to inspect a suspected leaking air hose without waiting for the train to stop.

I got the engineer back on his seat. He was dead.

\* \* \* \* \*

I tied him in place and then began pulling on the whistle cord like mad. It was not my work to operate a Diesel. I'd not troubled to learn.

I wondered why the fireman did not get back. I was going to jump, although I didn't like my chances at that speed, when I suddenly discovered a strange man in the cab with me. He was a pretty ordinary little guy, except for a wild, shaggy head of hair.

"You chump!" he squeaked at me. "Maybe next time you'll obey the rules, and not sneak by without finding out things! See that short rod with the spring-clip? Squeeze that clip and pull the rod back. Move, you fathead!"

I did as the shaggy man told me, and felt the speed of the train slacken slightly as the power went off.

"Now, that brass handle sticking out of that pipe--move it to the right slowly. \_Slowly\_, you dunce!"

Nine cars and the Diesel ground slowly to a stop. The wheels shuddered and skidded slightly because of my inexperienced hand, but the train did stop.

The stranger nodded in satisfaction. "When you get back home, bone up on things. But right now you go take a close look at the manifest card on the sides of the second and third cars...."

I jumped to the ground to go back and look at the second and third cars. As I passed the rear of the Diesel I saw why the fireman had not come back to the engine cab. All that was left of him was the lower part of his body. He had slipped, caught one foot and gone under the wheels.

I came to the second car and read the manifest label. My hair stood straight up.

The cars were marked:

Danger  
DYNAMITE  
\_High Explosive\_

The shaggy man was at my side. "You've got questions. But let me ask you one: Ever hear a story about how if you travel back to the time of an ancestor and you let him die you never get born?"

"What about it?" I said.

"It's true," said the shaggy man.

End of Project Gutenberg's Old Shag, by Bob Farnham

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# IN THE JAG-WHIFFING SERVICE

BY David R. Bunch

*The jag-stuff in those black rings was  
wonderful, but why did they have to package  
it with so many extra accessories? \_*

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I had always said there was an easier way. And I think, when we invade, I'll be proved right. But you know how things get started, and how powerful tradition can be and how old-line thinking can keep people, even a whole planet, in a rut.

The big cargo saucers were getting bigger and bigger each year, what with the growing popularity of the jag-whiff places, and the jag-whiff places themselves were growing in number with more and more people going "on the jag" because--well, partly because--of troubles in the sky, like strange balls whirling around and unexplainable objects going \_beep\_ and \_wuff\_ and \_wuff wuff\_. We of the saucers had slipped past these first baby objects O.K. and knew they were just little old harmless ping-pongs that chattered a little now and then like a greeting going past. But tell the people that! They'd throw a big glass on one of the whirlers and see spikes sticking out and maybe a big pair of eyes inside and a nose and a long red tongue hanging down. "The Earthits!" they'd scream like they'd just fallen into one of the hot canals, and they'd race off to a jag-whiff jag like Judgment-Day-of-Sins itself was after them. And the funny part of it is, I guess the people were right being scared like that, the way things turned out.

But is it any wonder we were having to increase the size of the saucers to space-haul all that jag-whiff up through the rattleballs? And a big reason makes me think it could have been done more efficiently, we were having to take so much junk stuff, extra accessories I guess you'd call it, to get the jag-whiff. Our Earthit contacts were always giving us the old breeze about cost of labor, cost of materials, improvement in design and next year's inventories. Apparently the dealers didn't understand at all what the play was with us because they'd give us so much blab-blab that didn't apply, all about futuristic design and about how one jag-whiffer machine had it all over another jag-whiffer machine, which to us didn't mean a thing. And we didn't talk, because we'd heard already how some Earthits feared the saucers, and how some Earthits said they didn't exist at all, and how some other Earthits

were on the fence, saying maybe they did maybe they didn't so what? and how there was wide fear and great unrest among the Earthits in general. And when it's like that, and you're a possible source of the wide fear and unrest, a whole planet full of people can easily decide they don't want any part of contributing to your pleasure.

And that's what the jag-whiff was to us actually, pleasure. Back home when our troubles had us down, or maybe we just felt like raising a little dust, we'd go to a jag-whiff place. We'd plunk down our pay-pictures, and the whiff-tender would wheel out one of those black rings, which they have to keep under special pressures in our climate. Then he'd screw on the tube with the face piece and we'd take our whiff and something out of the black ring--just seemed like real thick chest filler to me--would spread all through to the farthest reaches of our breath bags and go into our blood and suddenly all five of our eye sticks would start whirling and focusing and zeroing-in for dames and our arms and legs would start a kick and a slap dance, enough to shake the planet down. And when our face spines and head tubes would go into that special sharp buzz of contentment, we'd know we were on our jag, full and warm and happy with as much pleasure as any Martian is ever supposed to know. But we never revealed the play to our Earthit contacts, just slipped in at night in our noiseless saucers with all lights dimmed, cleared our cargo tubes of the tons of pay-picture we'd brought (green copy of the Earthits' currency) and took on as many of the gleaming jag-whiffer machines as our cargo tubes would hold.

\* \* \* \* \*

But it is ten years now since a jag-whiffer captain has steered his saucer through the whirling balls. It got so the satellites would drum on the saucer from a long way out. Deafening! Dreadful! We saw what was coming and we tried to beat it. We saucered around the clock for a while trying to stockpile enough jag-whiff to last us. But of course we couldn't. We are about out of it now, and our land is strewn with the glittery shells that were once attached to the black tubes of the jag-whiff.

And it could all have been done so different. I'm sure it could. That stuff wasn't just in the tubes of the jag-whiffer machines down there, I'm convinced of that. That stuff may have been all around us down there. I believe it was. But our government would insist we get into these suits, about so far out, you see, about the time we'd start contacting the rattle balls. And they threatened us with removal of the contacts if we broke the rules about the suits. In addition to that, they said we'd die anyway. So you see how life can be--grim and fuzzy and unsafe most of the time. And to make things even more uncertain, just because they couldn't duplicate the product we were hauling, our scientists got uppity and ignored the whole problem. Except to run off to the jag-whiff places of course to ease their frustrations, which

they did plenty often when they thought they wouldn't be seen.

But when we invade down through there, which we plan to do soon now, with our special equipment to catch and explode the whirlyballs, I think we're going to find out plenty. Among other things, I think we're going to find out that the stuff we cargoed up here at such great cost, that was so inefficiently packaged, is all around us down there. I think when we take over down there, with the right filtering equipment, jag-whiffing may become as common and economical as breathing. And another thing, I think we're going to find out we were taken for quite a ride by the Earthits with their silly way of packaging jag-whiff. Imagine having to buy all that chrome and steel, guaranteed to go over one hundred miles per hour, just to get four little black rings of whiff. And for all the Earthits talked about it, the rings with the white sidewalls didn't whiff one bit better than the others!

End of Project Gutenberg's In the Jag-Whiffing Service, by David R. Bunch

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# THE SHORT SNORTER

By Charles Einstein

*His saucer was parked in the  
woods, and Mr. Steariot (from Venus)  
was parked in the lobby....\_*

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Three paths led through the woods away from the resort hotel, and of the three two were clearly marked: one with a sign that said it led to the lake, the other pointing toward the golf links. The third pathway was unmarked, and this was the one that inevitably the lovers and the honeymooners took--the path that Alice and Fred Daniels followed today.

The sun was unusually warm for this time of year, but only a few yards along the pathway Fred and Alice were swallowed up by the great and near-great trees of the forest. The sunlight was, except for an occasional patch of light here and there, warded away by the foliage above. The forest was very quiet. The pathway bridged a silent brook, and then, perhaps a third of a mile into the woods, turned abruptly to the left and the woods became even more dense, the pathway narrow.

Through the trees to the right at this point was a clearing, an unusual grassy circle perhaps sixty yards in diameter. It was not the clearing itself, however, but, instead, the glint of color in the sunlight that caused Fred and Alice to stop and look.

Alice said, "Fred, what is that?"

"Don't know," he said. "Something red. Let's look."

The two of them turned off the path and made their way through a dismal barrage of thicket to the clearing that lay beyond. When they got there, they saw the circular object--\_vehicle\_ might be a better word. It was possibly fifteen yards in diameter. It seemed to be made of three rings, smaller ones bottom and top and the larger one ribbing the center, and to be constructed of some kind of plastic. Between the central and upper rings were set a series of small windows. The entire thing was painted a gaudy red.

"What do you think it is?" Fred said.

"A flying saucer," Alice said promptly. She laughed a little, but



clutched at her husband's arm. "Isn't it?"

"I don't know."

"But what else would it be?"

"I don't know," Fred said again. "Let's look inside."

"Fred," Alice said, "You'd better not--"

"Don't be silly," he said, and walked resolutely up to the object and, standing on tiptoe, peered through one of the windows.

"What is it?" Alice called from the edge of the clearing. "What do you see?"

"It's empty," he called back.

"What's inside?"

Fred shook his head. "You won't believe it."

"What?"

"It's got a steering wheel," he called out hollowly. "And some dials."

"My goodness," Alice said. "Is it a real one?"

"How do I know?" he said, and rejoined her, casting a series of glances uncertainly over his shoulder at the bright red saucer behind him.

"What do you suppose we ought to do?"

"Tell somebody," Alice said. "I suppose."

"Who do we tell?"

"I don't know. There must be \_somebody\_--"

They looked almost guiltily at each other. "Nobody'll believe us," Fred said.

"Why not?" Alice said. "It's \_here\_, isn't it?"

Fred stopped and thought. "Who knows how long it'll stay?"

They looked at each other again. Then Alice said slowly, "If we went back and got the camera--"

\* \* \* \* \*

Swiftly, they made their way back toward the hotel through the quiet forest. When they got there, they found Mr. Mason, the manager of the hotel, adjusting the badminton net in front of the main porch. Mr. Mason loosed a ready smile. "How's everything?" he said. "Find enough to do?"

"Yes, thank you," Fred said to him. "We were just walking through the woods. We came back for our camera. Then we're off again."

Mr. Mason nodded. "Find the saucer?"

Fred looked at him. "You mean the flying saucer?"

The manager nodded again. "I see you did find it. Good. Take a picture of it, by all means. I've already taken a whole batch myself."

"You have?" Fred said, frowning. "What's it all about?"

"It's a flying saucer," Mr. Mason said. "From Venus. Mr. Steariot, who piloted it, is a guest here. I can introduce you to him if you like. He speaks excellent English."

Fred Daniels said, "Wait a minute. You--"

"Oh, there's no point in it," Mr. Mason said in a weary tone of voice. "No point in it at all. I took pictures. I tried to get the Army up here. I wrote letters." He shrugged expressively. "It's a cynical age we live in, I guess. Everybody's very polite, but they make it clear they think it's just a gimmick I worked up to get the hotel publicity." He nodded seriously. "The whole trouble's with Mr. Steariot. If he had a light bulb for a head, or seven legs, or talked funny, why, it'd be a different thing entirely. But he looks and acts just like you or I. Here I've got a legitimate flying saucer sitting on my property and you might as well try to tell them it's a--well, a flying saucer! For all they'll believe me. Now you two have seen it with your own eyes and you don't believe it either."

Fred swallowed and looked at Alice for a moment. Then he said, "What did you say his name was?"

"Mr. Steariot," Mr. Mason said. "Actually, he's just as happy nobody believes he's from Venus. If they believed it, they'd probably lock him up in jail somewhere or impound his saucer. As it is, he says this is the first vacation he's had in years." Mr. Mason looked unhappily about him. "He's probably in the lounge now. Want to meet him?"

Fred said dazedly, "I--"

"Ah, come on," Mr. Mason said. "He won't bite you." He led the way up the steps of the porch and into the lounge and over to where a small, mustachioed man, wearing eyeglasses and appearing to be in his late forties, was working a crossword puzzle in the morning paper.

"Mr. Steariot," Mr. Mason said, "I should like you to meet Mr. and Mrs. Daniels, also guests here. They have just seen your saucer."

"Charmed," Mr. Steariot said, and got to his feet. He shook hands with Fred Daniels. "Are you here for a long stay, Mr. Daniels?"

"I'm not sure," Fred said, a little unhappily. "Mr. Mason told us you were from Venus."

"I told them about you, Mr. Steariot," Mr. Mason said. "Naturally, they don't believe it any more than anybody else."

"No reason why they should," Mr. Steariot said amiably. "No reason in the world, if I may coin a phrase. Dr. Phelps at the Institute didn't believe it either."

Mr. Mason said, "Mr. Steariot here had a long interview with Dr. Phelps of the Geophysical Institute at Princeton when he first arrived here on Earth with us."

"Oh," Fred said. He gazed uncomfortably at Mr. Steariot. "We didn't mean to interrupt you."

"I was only doing the crossword puzzle," Mr. Steariot said. "Do you know a two-letter word for sun-god?"

Alice said, "Is this your first trip here?"

"You mean here to the hotel," Mr. Steariot said, "or to Earth?"

"Earth," Fred said, dismally.

"My second," Mr. Steariot said. "First trip I wound up near Leningrad. Terrible time. I thought they'd talk English, but they don't, and they thought I was an American, and two of their officials got into the saucer with me, and the only way I could save myself was to take off with them. They're on Venus now."

"This accounts," Mr. Mason broke in, "for the way those two high Russian officials suddenly disappeared from sight three years ago. You remember? Everybody thought they'd been liquidated."

Fred Daniels looked around the room. A hollow, frightening feeling had come upon him. There were hundreds of questions he could have asked,

and yet he wanted nothing so much as to be away from there.

His wife Alice, though, was constrained to learn more about Mr. Steariot. She said, "Mr. Steariot, may I ask you something?"

"By all means," Mr. Steariot said, and blinked owlishly at her.

"Do you," Alice said to him, "carry any money?"

It was, Fred Daniels realized, a marvelous question. If there were sham here, this would be the quickest way to--

"Why, of course." Mr. Steariot said, and reached for his wallet. "Let's see--health insurance--saucer driver's license--here, my dear. A five-djino bill." He extracted a yellow banknote and handed it to Alice. The banknote, slightly larger than an American dollar bill, was remarkably similar in other particulars. It had upon it a picture of a flying saucer, the figure 5, and, spelled out, "FIVE DJINOS".

"Let me sign it for you," Mr. Steariot said, taking out a pen. "You can have it for a souvenir."

"Like the short snorters in the war," Mr. Mason, the hotel manager, said. "You remember them, Mr. Daniels? Where people got famous signatures on five and ten and twenty-dollar bills and exchanged them and what not, and they called them short snorters?"

"I remember," Fred Daniels said. "Something like that."

"Five djinos on Venus," Mr. Steariot said, signing his name with a flourish, "is worth about twenty dollars here on Earth. No official rate of exchange, of course, but from what I've seen, that's about what I'd judge. Here you go." He handed the bill over.

"Well, wait, then," Fred Daniels said. "I ought to sign one of \_our\_ bills for \_you\_."

"Ah, no need for that," Mr. Steariot said. "No doubt you need twenty dollars worse than I need five djinos."

"Don't be ridiculous," Fred said, a little stiffly; and, by now committed, he went into his wallet and came out with a twenty dollar bill. He signed his name to it, using Mr. Steariot's fountain pen.

"Wonderful," Mr. Steariot said. "How nice to have met you both."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I feel very badly about this," Mr. Mason, the hotel manager, said to

Fred and Alice. The three of them were on the porch outside. "This short snorter business always seems to happen whenever I introduce Mr. Steariot to anyone. Dr. Phelps at the Institute gave him fifty dollars. Can you imagine that?"

"It's interesting in its way," Fred said. "It just occurred to me: Mr. Steariot can spend Earth money here, but we can't spend Venus money."

"That's true," Mr. Mason said. "On the other hand, Mr. Steariot has never once, to my knowledge, been the one to bring up the subject. I think it's quite painful to him, really. But the same thing inevitably occurs to everybody he meets. You know, let's see the color of your money. I guess people are pretty much the same everywhere--that is, everywhere on \_Earth\_. They judge everything in terms of money, including whether you've even been born on Earth! 'Let's see your money,' they say to Mr. Steariot, and out he comes with one of those damn five-djino bills, and we're off."

"You know," Alice Daniels said thoughtfully, "in a way it's a lesson. Isn't it, Fred? I mean, everybody is money conscious. Maybe too much so. I'm not sorry it cost us twenty dollars to meet Mr. Steariot."

"You may be right," Fred said to her. "You may be right. Who knows, some day this five-djino bill may be a very valuable--"

"There you go again," Alice cut in. "Always putting it in terms of money."

"But \_you're\_ the one," Fred said, "who thought to ask him about it in the first place."

"Don't quarrel," Mr. Mason, the hotel manager, said to them. "After all, for you it's just a vacation. For me, I've got this man sitting in my lounge day in and day out doing crossword puzzles and trading short snorters with my guests. Nobody really believes he's from Venus--nobody important, anyway. It's a little frightening, when you're trying to run a happy hotel. Sometimes I wish he'd go back to wherever he came from."

"Well," Fred said, "he's bound to leave one of these days."

"Maybe," Mr. Mason said doubtfully. "Offhand, though, I'd say the way he's taking it in, he can't afford to."

# THE RUMBLE AND THE ROAR

By Stephen Bartholomew

*The noise was too much for him.  
He wanted quiet--at any price.*

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When Joseph got to the office his ears were aching from the noise of the copter and from his earplugs. Lately, every little thing seemed to make him irritable. He supposed it was because his drafting department was behind schedule on the latest Defense contract. His ears were sore and his stomach writhed with dyspepsia, and his feet hurt.

Walking through the clerical office usually made him feel better. The constant clatter of typewriters and office machines gave him a sense of efficiency, of stability, an all-is-well-with-the-world feeling. He waved to a few of the more familiar employees and smiled, but of course you couldn't say hello with the continual racket.

This morning, somehow, it didn't make him feel better. He supposed it was because of the song they were playing over the speakers, "Slam Bang Boom," the latest Top Hit. He hated that song.

Of course the National Mental Health people said constant music had a beneficial effect on office workers, so Joseph was no one to object, even though he did wonder if anyone could ever actually listen to it over the other noise.

In his own office the steady din was hardly diminished despite soundproofing, and since he was next to an outside wall he was subjected also to the noises of the city. He stood staring out of the huge window for awhile, watching the cars on the freeway and listening to the homogeneous rumble and scream of turbines.

*Something's wrong with me*, he thought. *I shouldn't be feeling this way. Nerves. Nerves.*

He turned around and got his private secretary on the viewer. She simpered at him, trying to be friendly with her dull, sunken eyes.

"Betty," he told her, "I want you to make an appointment with my therapist for me this afternoon. Tell him it's just a case of nerves,

though."

"Yes sir. Anything else?" Her voice, like every one's, was a high pitched screech trying to be heard above the noise.

Joseph winced. "Anybody want to see me this morning?"

"Well, Mr. Wills says he has the first model of his invention ready to show you."

"Let him in whenever he's ready. Otherwise, if nothing important comes up, I want you to leave me alone."

"Yes, sir, certainly." She smiled again, a mechanical, automatic smile that seemed to want to be something more.

Joseph switched off.

\_\_That was a damn funny way of saying it \_\_, he thought. \_\_"I want you to leave me alone." As if somebody were after me.\_\_

He spent about an hour on routine paperwork and then Bob Wills showed up so Joseph switched off his dictograph and let him in.

"I'm afraid you'll have to make it brief, Bob," he grinned. "I've a whale of a lot of work to do, and I seem to be developing a splitting headache. Nerves, you know."

"Sure, Mister Partch. I won't take a minute; I just thought you'd like to have a look at the first model of our widget and get clued in on our progress so far...."

"Yes, yes, just go ahead. How does the thing work?"

Bob smiled and set the grey steel chassis on Partch's desk, sat down in front of it, and began tracing the wiring for Joseph.

It was an interesting problem, or at any rate should have been. It was one that had been harassing cities, industry, and particularly air-fields, for many years. Of course, every one wore earplugs--and that helped a little. And some firms had partially solved the problem by using personnel that were totally deaf, because such persons were the only ones who could stand the terrific noise levels that a technological civilization forced everyone to endure. The noise from a commercial rocket motor on the ground had been known to drive men mad, and sometimes kill them. There had never seemed to be any wholly satisfactory solution.

But now Bob Wills apparently had the beginnings of a real answer. A

device that would use the principle of interference to cancel out sound waves, leaving behind only heat.

It should have been fascinating to Partch, but somehow he couldn't make himself get interested in it.

"The really big problem is the power requirement," Wills was saying. "We've got to use a lot of energy to cancel out big sound waves, but we've got several possible answers in mind and we're working on all of them."

He caressed the crackle-finish box fondly.

"The basic gimmick works fine, though. Yesterday I took it down to a static test stand over in building 90 and had them turn on a pretty fair-sized steering rocket for one of the big moon-ships. Reduced the noise-level by about 25 per cent, it did. Of course, I still needed my plugs."

Joseph nodded approvingly and stared vacantly into the maze of transistors and tubes.

"I've built it to work on ordinary 60 cycle house current," Wills told him. "In case you should want to demonstrate it to anybody."

Partch became brusque. He liked Bob, but he had work to do.

"Yes, I probably shall, Bob. I tell you what, why don't you just leave it here in my office and I'll look it over later, hm?"

"Okay, Mr. Partch."

Joseph ushered him out of the office, complimenting him profusely on the good work he was doing. Only after he was gone and Joseph was alone again behind the closed door, did he realize that he had a sudden yearning for company, for someone to talk to.

<tb>

Partch had Betty send him in a light lunch and he sat behind his desk nibbling the tasteless stuff without much enthusiasm. He wondered if he was getting an ulcer.

Yes, he decided, he was going to have to have a long talk with Dr. Coles that afternoon. Be a pleasure to get it all off his chest, his feeling of melancholia, his latent sense of doom. Be good just to talk about it.

Oh, everything was getting to him these days. He was in a rut, that was



it. A rut.

He spat a sesame seed against the far wall and the low whirl of the automatic vacuum cleaner rose and fell briefly.

Joseph winced. The speakers were playing "Slam Bang Boom" again.

His mind turned away from the grating melody in self defense, to look inward on himself.

Of what, after all, did Joseph Partch's life consist? He licked his fingers and thought about it.

What would he do this evening after work, for instance?

Why, he'd stuff his earplugs back in his inflamed ears and board the commuter's copter and ride for half an hour listening to the drumming of the rotors and the pleading of the various canned commercials played on the copter's speakers loud enough to be heard over the engine noise and through the plugs.

And then when he got home, there would be the continuous yammer of his wife added to the Tri-Di set going full blast and the dull food from the automatic kitchen. And synthetic coffee and one stale cigaret. Perhaps a glass of brandy to steady his nerves if Dr. Coles approved.

Partch brooded. The sense of foreboding had been submerged in the day's work, but it was still there. It was as if, any moment, a hydrogen bomb were going to be dropped down the chimney, and you had no way of knowing when.

And what would there be to do after he had finished dinner that night? Why, the same things he had been doing every night for the past fifteen years. There would be Tri-Di first of all. The loud comedians, and the musical commercials, and the loud bands, and the commercials, and the loud songs....

And every twenty minutes or so, the viewer would jangle with one of Felicia's friends calling up, and more yammering from Felicia.

Perhaps there would be company that night, to play cards and sip drinks and talk and talk and talk, and never say a thing at all.

There would be aircraft shaking the house now and then, and the cry of the monorail horn at intervals.

And then, at last, it would be time to go to bed, and the murmur of the somnolent orator on the Theory of Groups all through the long night.

And in the morning, he would be shocked into awareness with the clangor of the alarm clock and whatever disc jockey the clock radio happened to tune in on.

Joseph Partch's world was made up of sounds and noises, he decided. Dimly, he wondered of what civilization itself would be constructed if all the sounds were once taken away. \_Why\_, after all, was the world of Man so noisy? It was almost as if--as if everybody were making as much noise as they could to conceal the fact that there was something lacking. Or something they were afraid of.

Like a little boy whistling loudly as he walks by a cemetery at night.

Partch got out of his chair and stared out the window again. There was a fire over on the East Side, a bad one by the smoke. The fire engines went screaming through the streets like wounded dragons. Sirens, bells. Police whistles.

All at once, Partch realized that never in his life had he experienced real quiet or solitude. That actually, he had no conception of what an absence of thunder and wailing would be like. A total absence of sound and noise.

Almost, it was like trying to imagine what a negation of \_space\_ would be like.

And then he turned, and his eyes fell on Bob Wills' machine. It could reduce the noise level of a rocket motor by 25 per cent, Wills had said. Here in the office, the sound level was less than that of a rocket motor.

And the machine worked on ordinary house current, Bob had said.

Partch had an almost horrifying idea. Suppose....

But what would Dr. Coles say about this, Partch wondered. Oh, he had to get a grip on himself. This was silly, childish....

But looking down, he found that he had already plugged in the line cord. An almost erotic excitement began to shake Joseph's body. The sense of disaster had surged up anew, but he didn't recognize it yet.

An absence of \_sound\_? No! Silly!

Then a fire engine came tearing around the corner just below the window, filling the office with an ocean of noise.

Joseph's hand jerked and flicked the switch.

And then the dream came back to him, the nightmare of the night before that had precipitated, unknown to him, his mood of foreboding. It came back to him with stark realism and flooded him with unadorned fear.

In the dream, he had been in a forest. Not just the city park, but a \_real\_ forest, one thousands of miles and centuries away from human civilization. A wood in which the foot of Man had never trod.

It was dark there, and the trees were thick and tall. There was no wind, the leaves were soft underfoot. And Joseph Partch was all alone, \_completely\_ alone.

And it was--quiet.

Doctor Coles looked at the patient on the white cot sadly.

"I've only seen a case like it once before in my entire career, Dr. Leeds."

Leeds nodded.

"It \_is\_ rather rare. Look at him--total catatonia. He's curled into a perfect foetal position. Never be the same again, I'm afraid."

"The shock must have been tremendous. An awful psychic blow, especially to a person as emotionally disturbed as Mr. Partch was."

"Yes, that machine of Mr. Wills' is extremely dangerous. What amazes me is that it didn't kill Partch altogether. Good thing we got to him when we did."

Dr. Coles rubbed his jaw.

"Yes, you know it \_is\_ incredible how much the human mind can sometimes take, actually. As you say, it's a wonder it didn't kill him."

He shook his head.

"Perfectly horrible. How could any modern human stand it? Two hours, he was alone with that machine. Imagine--\_two hours\_ of total silence!"

# SHOCK TROOP

By Richard Bolton

*\_The invaders were going to  
make galactic history. Fate  
made it a comedy of errors.\_*

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from  
Worlds of If Science Fiction, October 1956.  
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Zurg thwirmed, and admitted to himself that he was uneasy. Arching his thorax, he unrolled his antennae slowly in a lazy gesture he hoped would conceal the unseemly nervousness he felt now that the ship had swung into an orbit around the strange planet. When a commander briefs his officers, he must radiate confidence and calm.

"Companions, an historic moment has arrived," he began pompously, his antennae moving in the deliberate, stylized movements of the Court language. "Below us lies the verdant expanse of the third planet, green gem of the heavens."

At this, several of his subordinates turned a rather puzzled yellow around their head orifices, obviously unable to understand a gesture of what he was saying. Only the second-in-command seemed unconcerned; he knew from long experience that his commander would revert to common vernacular when he had finished the usual ceremonial preamble.

Zurg did so, noting the relieved hues of his officers as he continued: "As you all know, our scouts have reconnoitered this world on several occasions. But now the time has arrived to make an actual landing. In fact, companions, we are the vanguard of an invasion." Pausing to let this register, he was pleased to see that none of the officers seemed to be suppressing thwirms. If anything, they were calmer than he was.

"Not a great deal is known about the inhabitants of the planet, but the dominant form of life, strangely enough, is mammalian, and possesses some intelligence. Her Majesty desires conquest without undue destruction. As the Queen wills, her servants shall act."

All dipped their antennae at this formula, and watched in attentive hues as the commander went on to explain that due to the high percentage of oxygen in the atmosphere, special coverings would have to be worn. They would filter the air before it reached the ventral tracheae, and leaving the head exposed, would shield all the rest

of the body. A bit clumsy, the commander admitted, but absolutely essential.

"Now as to our behavior toward the natives--previous experience with mammalian life-types shows that they are susceptible to panic and fear when confronted with something totally strange, so we will use tactics which basically are very simple. First, we will land near a native settlement. When we march into the area, our alien appearance will stun the natives. Our detachment of all-range telepathic sensitives will notify us when the state of shock has set in, then our attack support will open up with full-scale mental assault, and keep the creatures paralyzed while we seize the area before a defense can be organized. Then the Grand Fleet will proceed here at top speed."

"Remember that in this, as in all operations where the powers of the collective mind are used, we must first trigger the enemy's reaction by physical means, therefore nothing can be done until we know that they are in the needed state of shock. Now are there any questions?"

How strange actually, mused the commander as he returned to his cubicle, that a race like his own, so gifted at pure mental contact with other life-forms, should still use signals and colorations to communicate among themselves. The chafed spot on his left antenna was paining again after the exercise of the briefing. The report had said that these mammals were believed to converse through some kind of atmospheric vibrations.... Odd too, that mental warfare, refined and developed though it was, could still only be used against minds agitated by a specific physical stimulus. And that physical stimulus had to be provided by the invaders appearing on the scene, and if necessary performing the Dra, a series of dances and contortions so repulsive to most life-forms that all thinking would fade into panic. Having once thwirmed himself at a performance of the Dra, he hoped it wouldn't be necessary ... his musings were interrupted as the ship's lights flickered to orange, signalling hands to stations for planetfall.

Leaving the con of the ship to his second-in-command, he shut himself in his cubicle and made preparations to be miserably sick, as he always was during deceleration. Stroking the chafed spot on his antenna with the smooth edge of his left forearm's prehensile claw, Zurg raised his medicine kit in his secondary tentacles and snapped off the heavy lead seal with his jagged incisor mandibles. I wonder, he speculated, why alien races always find us so frightening....

\* \* \* \* \*

The brilliant orange sun was high in the sky, but only a few filtered beams penetrated to the sheltered copse where the slate-colored ship lay partially concealed by artfully placed vines and underbrush. Drawn up in three ranks beside the ship, only their heads protruding from

the loose-fitting coveralls, stood the detail picked to make the entry into the native settlement. Zurg led them out through the underbrush barrier they had thrown up the night before, and they emerged onto a little-traveled dirt road leading off across the fields toward a cluster of buildings that marked the edge of town.

No creatures appeared as the invading column lumbered along. As they neared the edge of the settlement, Zurg, his antennae drooping slightly from the unusual heat, turned to remind the others: "Remember, the mental assault won't begin until we are well into the area and shock reaction is effected, so \_stay in formation\_ until I order otherwise."

There were still no natives in sight on the small side street by which they entered town; but as they turned a corner and swung on to the broad central thoroughfare, the commander saw that the street was clogged with natives, a great milling mass of them moving up the street in the same direction as his column, about a hundred yards ahead.

For a moment they didn't appear to notice the newcomers, but soon a growing number had turned and were gesturing excitedly to each other, pointing at the approaching troop. Watching them anxiously, Zurg saw no evidence of panic.

The column kept moving, and the crowd began parting to let them pass through. Some darted forward as though to get a closer look at the strangers. The commander fought off a thwirm as he realized the crowd was now all around them, pressing in more closely on every side. The atmosphere itself seemed to vibrate strangely, and looking around, he saw that the creatures were opening small head orifices and striking the ends of their forward limbs together. Were they communicating--or was it something else? It was surely not panic.

Feeling increasingly dizzy from the heat and vibrations, he glanced anxiously over his followers, and saw at once that they were more upset than he. Colors were flushing their faces in meaningless successions. One or two seemed to be staggering. The shock threshold of these beings has been horribly underestimated, thought Zurg desperately. Only one thing left to do--turning again, he signalled the detail to begin the Dra. Perhaps that would overcome this incomprehensible counterattack....

\* \* \* \* \*

"I tell you Charlie, you've got to discipline that gang! They didn't show up on time, they didn't complete the route, they put on a public ritual that wasn't scheduled, apparently stealing the entire show--stupid crowd yelled themselves hoarse. Then they all reeled off into a side street. They must have been drunk to a man--I understand about half of them had to be carried! \_And\_ when I confronted Andy Sharpe, he swore up and down that they weren't out of their hotel that

morning. All sleeping off that spree they had the night before. He actually had the nerve to say, 'I don't know who those boys were that you claim were a block behind the end of the parade, but they weren't our boys.'"

Charlie Dils, new Commander of the Illinois chapter of the American Legion, leaned back in his chair car seat and blew a cloud of cigar smoke toward the ceiling. "Maybe they were men from Mars," he grinned. Then, remembering his dignity, he sobered abruptly. "Anyway, one bunch looks about the same as another, once they get their masks on--good Lord, it was a hot day for masks--but it certainly made the parade more impressive. People are still talking about it. We're even getting credit for having a flying saucer. Some farmer out at the edge of town claims he saw one take off after the parade last night. Says it was going west like a bat out of hell.

"If we can get that kind of publicity, Frank, I wouldn't worry about Andy and the boys. I'll write him a letter. It was a great convention--let's let it go at that."

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## THE ETHICATORS

By Willard Marsh

*They were used to retarded life forms, but  
this was the worst. Yet it is a missionary's duty  
to bring light where there is none, for who can  
tell what devious forms evolution might take?\_*

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from  
Worlds of If Science Fiction, August 1955.  
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The missionaries came out of the planetary system of a star they didn't call Antares. They called it, naturally enough, The Sun--just as home was Earth, Terra, or simply The World. And naturally enough, being the ascendant animal on Earth, they called themselves human beings. They were looking for extraterrestrial souls to save.

They had no real hope of finding humans like themselves in this wonderously diversified universe. But it wasn't against all probability that, in their rumaging, there might not be a humanoid species to whom they could reach down a helping paw; some emergent cousin with at least a rudimentary symmetry from snout to tail, and hence a rudimentary soul.

The ship they chose was a compact scout, vaguely resembling the outside of an orange crate--except that they had no concept of an orange crate and, being a tesseract, it had no particular outside. It was simply an expanding cube (and as such, quite roomy) whose "interior" was always paralleling its "exterior" (or attempting to), in accordance with all the well-known, basic and irrefutable laws on the subject.

A number of its sides occupied the same place at the same time, giving a hypothetical spectator the illusion of looking down merging sets of railway tracks. This, in fact, was its precise method of locomotion. The inner cube was always having to catch up, caboose-fashion, with the outer one in time (or space, depending on one's perspective). And whenever it had done so, it would have arrived with itself--at approximately wherever in the space-time continuum it had been pointed.

When they felt the jar of the settling geodesics, the crew crowded at the forward visiplat to see where they were. It was the outskirts of a G type star system. Silently they watched the innermost planet float past, scorched and craggy, its sunward side seeming about to relapse to a molten state.

The Bosun-Colonel turned to the Conductor. "A bit of a disappointment I'm afraid, sir. Surely with all that heat...?"

"Steady, lad. The last wicket's not been bowled." The Conductor's whiskers quivered in amusement at his next-in-command's impetuosity. "You'll notice that we're dropping downward. If the temperature accordingly continues dropping--"

He couldn't shrug, he wasn't physiologically capable of it, but it was apparent that he felt they'd soon reach a planet whose climate could support intelligent life.

If the Bosun-Colonel had any ideas that such directions as up and down were meaningless in space, he kept them to himself. As the second planet from its sun hove into view, he switched on the magniscan eagerly.

"I say, this is more like it. Clouds and all that sort of thing. Should we have a go at it, sir?"

The Conductor yawned. "Too bloody cloudy for my taste. Too equivocal. Let's push on," he said languidly. "I have a hunch the third planet



might be just our dish of tea."

Quelling his disappointment, the Bosun-Colonel waited for the third planet to swim into being. And when it did, blooming like an orchid in all its greens and moistnesses, he could scarcely contain his excitement.

"Why, it looks just like Earth," he marveled. "Gad, sir, what a master stroke of navigation. How did you realize this would be it?"

"Oh, I don't know," the Conductor said modestly. "Things usually have a habit of occurring in threes. I'm quite a student of numerology, you know." Then he remembered the Mission and drew himself erect on all his legs. "You may prepare for landing, Mister," he ordered crisply.

The Bosun-Colonel shifted over to manual and busied himself at the helm, luffing the square craft down the troughs of air. Gliding over the vast tropical oceans, he put down at a large land mass above a shallow warm sea, twenty-five degrees below the northern pole.

Too numbed for comment, the crew stared out at the alien vista. They'd heard of retarded life forms from other Missionary expeditions--of planets where the inhabitants, in extreme emergency, had been known to commit murder. But this was surely the worst, the most vicious imaginable in the galaxy.

Here, with life freshly up from the sea, freshly launched on the long climb to maturity and self-realization--was nothing but horror. With so lush a vegetation, so easily capable of supporting them side by side in abundance, the monsters were actually feeding on each other. Great lumbering beasts they were with their bristling hides and huge tails, charging between the giant tree ferns; gouging living chunks from one another while razor-toothed birds with scaly wings flapped overhead, screaming for the remnants. As the sounds of carnage came through the audio ports, the youngest Oarsman keeled over in a faint.

Even the Conductor was visibly shaken. The Bosun-Colonel turned to him with a sick expression.

"Surely it's a lost cause, Skipper. Life like this will never have a soul worth saving."

"Not in its present stage," the Old Man was forced to agree. "Still, one never knows the devious paths that evolution takes." He considered the scene for a thoughtful, shuddering interval. "Perhaps in several thousand millenniums...."

The Bosun-Colonel tried to visualize the possibility of Ethical Life ever materializing through these swamp mists, but the logic against it

was too insurmountable for the imagination.

"Even so," he conceded, "granting the impossible--whatever shape it took, the only worthwhile species would still be...." He couldn't bring himself to say it.

"Meat-eaters," the Conductor supplied grimly.

On hearing this, the Oarsman who had just revived promptly fainted again.

"It's too deep in the genes," the Conductor continued, "too far advanced for us to tamper with. All we can hope to do is modify their moral outlook. So that by the time they achieve star travel, they'll at least have a basic sense of Fair Play."

Sighing, bowed by responsibilities incommensurate with his chronological youth, he gave the order wearily. It was snapped down the chain of command to the Senior Yardbird:

"All paws stand by to lower the Ethics Ray! Step lively, lads--bugger off, now...."

There was a din of activity as the outer locks were opened and the bulky mechanism was shipped over the side. It squatted on a cleared rise of ground in all its complex, softly ticking majesty, waiting for the First Human to pad within range of its shedding Grace and Uplift. The work party scrambled back to the ship, anxious to be off this sinister terrain. Once more the crew gathered at the visiplate as the planet fell away beneath them, the Ethics Ray winking in the day's last light like a cornerstone. Or perhaps a tambourine....

\* \* \* \* \*

Night closed down on the raw chaotic world, huge beasts closed in on the strange star-fallen souvenir. They snuffled over it; then enraged at discovering it was nothing they could fill their clamoring mindless stomachs with, attempted to wreck it. They were unsuccessful, for the Machine had been given an extra heavy coat of shellac and things to withstand such monkeyshines. And the Machine, in its own finely calibrated way, ignored its harassers, for they had no resemblance to the Life it had been tuned to influence.

Days lengthened into decades, eons. The seas came shouldering in to stand towers tall above the Ethics Ray, lost in the far ooze below. Then even the seas receded, and the mountains buckled upward in their place, their arrogant stone faces staring changelessly across the epochs. Until they too were whittled down by erosion. The ice caps crept down, crackling and grinding the valleys. The ground stretched

and tossed like a restless sleeper, settled, and the Ethics Ray was brought to light once more.

As it always had, it continued beaming its particular signal, on a cosmic ray carrier modulated by a pulse a particular number of angstroms below infrared. The beasts that blundered within its field were entirely different now, but they still weren't the Right Ones. Among them were some shambling pale bipeds, dressed in skins of other beasts, who clucked over its gleaming exterior and tried to chip it away for spearheads. In this of course they were unsuccessful.

And then one day the First Human wandered by, paused square in the path of the beam. His physiology was only approximate, his I.Q. was regrettably low--but he was Pre-Moral Life, such as it was, on this planet.

The Ethics Ray made the necessary frequency adjustments, tripped on full force. The Primitive froze under the bombardment, its germ plasm shifting in the most minute and subtle dimensions. Then, its mission fulfilled, the Ethics Ray collapsed into heavy molecules and sank into the ground. The first convert raced away in fright, having no idea what had happened. Neither did his billion sons and daughters....

\* \* \* \* \*

Back on the home base, the Conductor reported in at the Ethication of Primitive Planets office. It was a magnificently imposing building, as befitting the moral seat of the universe. And the Overseer was an equally imposing human with ears greyed by service. His congratulations were unreserved.

"A splendid mission, lad," he said, "and I don't mind suggesting--strictly entre nous--that it could jolly well result in a Fleet Conductorship for you."

The Conductor was overwhelmed.

"Now just let me jot down the essentials while they're still fresh in mind," he continued, pawing through a desk drawer. "Botheration! I seem to have traded the last of my styluses. Do you happen to have one on you?"

"With pleasure." The Conductor handed over his monogrammed gold stylus, receiving in exchange a toy silencemaker.

"My youngster traded it to me this morning," the Overseer chuckled.

He wrote rapidly for several moments, then gave the stylus back. The Conductor found a weathered paper-weight in his rear pocket, which he

traded him for it. It looked like it might have come from this very desk at one time. Then with a smart salute, he about-faced.

On the way out, a pair of secretaries paused in their trading of a pelt brush for a tail-curler to watch him admiringly. As well they might. Fleet Conductor!

The future Fleet Conductor of a solar system he would never think of calling Antares paused at the door. In its polished panel he regarded himself with due appreciation. He had sown the seeds of civilization on a far-flung planet where, countless light years from now, they would flower to maturity. Not among the strongest or cleverest species, to be sure, but among those most worthy of applying First Principles, the moral law of give and take.

Among those remote cousins of the Conductor himself--who under no circumstances would ever think of himself as resembling a rather oversized trader rat.

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## LONESOME HEARTS

By Russ Winterbotham

*Mjly is Yljm's love life. She is her sisters, her mothers, herself and her ancestors. But poor old Yljm can never be a mother or a sister--just himself!\_*

It seems unnecessary to say that my story began a long time ago, but I do not intend to be subtle. I am not clever and my lying is unpolished, almost amateurish. So I certainly could not be subtle, which requires both cleverness and an ability to tell the truth and a lie in the same breath.

Let us turn back the clock a few ages. I was lying in the sun thinking of love. I understand that you human beings have an aversion to biological discussion, so I will not go into detail. But I must remind you that my love life is quite different from yours, for I am from another planet. At the time under discussion, I was most deeply in love.

My heart's desire had no shape, the lovely creature. She had no intelligence, the divine soul. But she was the greatest bit of protoplasm in any galaxy you could name. By our standards, I probably might be called handsome. I was young and healthy. I had all of my genes and chromosomes. My color was the dirty green that is associated with beauty.

The sun warmed my body and the tidal undulation of my planet's surface rocked me gently. And then she came into my life. She floated gently in the breeze, her dainty figure held aloft by a mere hint of levitation. Sparks of static electricity shot from her tender cilia so brightly that I was forced to exude a layer of protective fibre to protect my visual buds. She sucked a deep breath of cyanic gas into her pulmonary pouch and spoke to me sweetly with a voice like distant thunder.

"My dear Yljm, the world is coming to an end."

I could not believe her, for she had no intelligence. She only loved to talk. "Perhaps," I said, "but not today."

"Very soon, then," said she. Her name was Mjly.

I watched her with patronizing amusement. The static electricity showed that she was nervous and upset, but people often get nervous and upset over trivial matters. "Now, how," I reasoned, "could our world come to an end? The other planet has gone on for thousands of years without colliding with us. We circle it, in fact."

"No," Mjly said, "that is not our doom. Actually our world will not cease to exist. Life will end here, that is all."

"Ah," I said. "Our atmosphere is escaping into space." I sucked air, viciously. True, the air was thin. True, the atmosphere was escaping. But there would be breathable amounts for many thousands of centuries yet to come.

"Not the air. The food is all gone. Things we eat have ceased to exist."

I levitated myself and looked out over the throbbing land. A few years ago, this land had been covered with vegetation. I had come to take vegetation so much for granted that I'd ceased to notice it. Now it was gone. There were no round fruits growing from tender grasses, no tubers dangling from the fungus trees, no legume vines sprawling over the rocks. Everywhere lay desert, barren dunes shaking their crests with tidal motion.

I lowered myself to the ground and dug my big fibrosities into the sod. No green leaves grew there beneath the surface. The soil was dead. "This will seriously interfere with our future, Mjly," I said.

"We might eat each other," she replied, "but then there would be no one left."

"No one? There are many others here."

"The others are dying," said Mjly, blinking her otic nerves eerily. "We soon will be the only ones left."

It was indeed a senseless thing to do, to die just because there was no means of going on living. But I must admit that I was tempted for a moment. But I hung onto myself, for there was Mjly, and as long as she lived, there was a reason for me to live too.

"It's not a cheerful prospect," I said, "but I suppose death by starvation is the best way out. We will face death as we have lived, cheerfully and fortuitously."

"And why should we die, when there is another world so close?" she asked.

"Are you suggesting interplanetary flight, my dear?" I was amused again, even though there was little enough left to be amused at.

She crinkled her sense of smell in reply, and I realized I was not being amused at the right time. Anchoring herself by magnetic processes, she began to weave the atmosphere delicately with her taste-bud tendrils. Quickly she hollowed the air molecules into a reflective mirror, and brought it to focus on our neighboring world. I levitated myself into a position so that I could look into the mirror.

The near planet was quite satisfactory. It was the one you know as the earth. It was young. It was green. Huge fern-like plants grew abundantly on its surface. It was full of food. And near.

"The trip could be made by levitation," Mjly said.

I hung back. "Animals might live there. We'd be devoured."

"I am not afraid," she said.

"We might not get hungry for a time. Let us linger here awhile. Later when we get desperate, there will be time enough for interplanetary flight." I hated the thought of stuffing myself full of air enough to last for the long trip.

Mjly lowered her visual buds. "I am going to become a mother," she said.

"Go then, and become a mother. I'll stay here till I get hungry and then join you."

Mjly unflexed her sense of touch and I felt sorry for her. "If I could be sure," I said, "that no wild animals live on the earth, I'd go sooner."

She snapped her sense of balance in happiness. "I will go first," said she. "If everything is pleasant and safe, I will return and let you know."

I nodded my otic nerves and off she went.

As you human beings are doubtless aware, space levitation is quite complicated, but not beyond accomplishment. Once you are able to reach the speed of escape the rest is easy. But Mjly was young and strong and soon she had disappeared from sight traveling at a tremendous velocity. I followed her as long as I could with the telescope and then I lowered myself to the tidal crest of a nearby sand dune and lost myself in metaphysical thoughts.

Almost half a year later I realized that Mjly had been gone longer than I expected. Either she had been eaten by wild animals on the earth, or she had forgotten me.

I was beginning to get lonesome and in a few more months I would get hungry. At the thought of enduring two such excruciating pains at a single time, I decided to risk my life. I would travel through space to the earth and try to find my beloved.

As you may have guessed, the planet on which we had been living is the one you now know as the Moon, and the distance to the earth is comparatively small. The sand dunes now have hardened and the tidal sway of its surface can be felt only slightly. The moon no longer turns on its axis and it has no sweetly scented cyanide in its atmosphere. It has no atmosphere of any sort. But it stands now as it did when I left it, glorious in death. Since I departed, no living thing has trod its soil.

My scientific sense instinctively came to the rescue as I approached the earth. I felt a strong gravity wrenching at my vitals and so instead of trying reverse levitation, I spread my processes so that the atmosphere caught in the folds of my skin and I came floating gently down to the ground without harm.

The earth was much as it had appeared through the molecule telescope. It was covered with green vegetation, good, rich, nourishing stuff. And there was enough to feed Mjly and me for a million years.

There were no animals of any sort. Again I went to my scientific sense for the answer. I realized that while vegetable life was far advanced, animal life had yet to appear. Mjly was the first of this type of life ever to set foot on terrestrial soil.

But where was she? On the moon, I could often locate her a thousand miles away by a simple radio call. Although the earth was much larger than the moon, I did not doubt that she was within a thousand miles. So

I generated power and issued a call.

I waited for the response. It came feebly to my antenna.

Using my sense of direction, I pushed through the vegetation in search of her. I did not levitate, because the feebleness of her call indicated she might be hurt and on the ground. Besides, levitation is much more difficult on the earth than on the moon.

The reply came stronger to my next call and I sensed through seven of my senses that she was near. She was on the ground, probably injured, which explained why she had not returned as she had promised.

I came to a patch of wilderness, a great marshy plain. In the middle of this swamp was a crater, like those caused by meteors, a deep, ugly scar in the mud. I shuddered at the thought that my darling Mjly might have landed there. Her weaker scientific sense might not have given her the cue to use her skin as a parachute and she might have made the fatal mistake of trying to reverse-levitate.

"Mjly!" I called, speaking aloud now. "Mjly! Where are you?"

"Yljm! I am here!"

Yes, the voice came from the crater. Gliding to its rim, I looked down. A pool of water lay on the bottom. A greenish scum covered the surface. The scum moved with a million tiny wriggles.

"Yes, Yljm," came Mjly's voice. "It is I. But I am no longer one being." And her voice sounded like a million tiny chirps joined together. "I landed with such force that I came apart. Now each of my body cells lives a life of its own. And now and then each cell grows fat and becomes two. I am my sisters, I ..."

Let's not be subtle about it. Mjly was a microbe, the beginning of animal life on the earth. She lives today, she is and always will be her sisters, her mothers, herself and her ancestors. But there are few ancestors, for microbes do not die--just part of themselves die.

And I do not die. For I crept away into a hole in the ground, where I will live forever. I do not starve, for roots reach me here. But I miss my love life with Mjly. I can never be a mother or a sister. I will always be me, a lonesome old bem.

... THE END



*Transcriber's Note:*

*This etext was produced from \_If Worlds of Science Fiction\_ July 1954. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note. Two occurrences of the word 'visory' have been amended to \_visual\_.*

End of Project Gutenberg's *Lonesome Hearts*, by Russell Robert Winterbotham

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## IRRESISTIBLE WEAPON

By H. B. Fyfe

*\_There's no such thing as a weapon too horrible to use; weapons will continue to become bigger, and deadlier. Like other things that can't be stopped....\_*

In the special observation dome of the colossal command ship just beyond Pluto, every nervous clearing of a throat rasped through the silence. Telescopes were available but most of the scientists and high officials preferred the view on the huge telescreen.

This showed, from a distance of several million miles, one of the small moons of the frigid planet, so insignificant that it had not been discovered until man had pushed the boundaries of space exploration past the asteroids. The satellite was about to become spectacularly significant, however, as the first target of man's newest, most destructive weapon.

"I need not remind you, gentlemen," white-haired Co-ordinator Evora of Mars had said, "that if we have actually succeeded in this race against our former Centaurian colonies, it may well prevent the imminent conflict entirely. In a few moments we shall know whether our scientists have developed a truly irresistible weapon."

Of all the officials, soldiers, and scientists present, Arnold Gibson was perhaps the least excited. For one thing, he had labored hard to make the new horror succeed and felt reasonably confident that it would. The project had been given the attention of every first-class scientific mind in the Solar System; for the great fear was that the new states on

the Centaurian planets might win the race of discovery and ...

\_And bring a little order into this old-fashioned, inefficient fumbling toward progress\_, Gibson thought contemptuously. \_Look at them--fools for all their degrees and titles! They've stumbled on something with possibilities beyond their confused powers of application.\_

A gasp rustled through the chamber, followed by an even more awed silence than had preceded the unbelievable, ultra-rapid action on the telescreen. Gibson permitted himself a tight smile of satisfaction.

\_Now my work really begins\_, he reflected.

A few quick steps brought him to Dr. Haas, director of the project, just before the less stunned observers surrounded that gentleman, babbling questions.

"I'll start collecting the Number Three string of recorders," he reported.

"All right, Arnold," agreed Haas. "Tell the others to get their ships out too. I'll be busy here."

\_Not half as busy as you will be in about a day\_, thought Gibson, heading for the spaceship berths.

\* \* \* \* \*

He had arranged to be assigned the recording machines drifting in space at the greatest distance from the command ship. The others would assume that he needed more time to locate and retrieve the apparatus--which would give him a head start toward Alpha Centauri.

His ship was not large, but it was powerful and versatile to cope with any emergency that may have been encountered during the dangerous tests. Gibson watched his instruments carefully for signs of pursuit until he had put a few million miles between himself and the command ship. Then he eased his craft into subspace drive and relaxed his vigilance.

He returned to normal space many "days" later in the vicinity of Alpha Centauri. They may have attempted to follow him for all he knew, but it hardly mattered by then. He broadcast the recognition signal he had been given to memorize long ago, when he had volunteered his services to the new states. Then he headed for the capital planet, Nessus. Long before reaching it, he acquired a lowering escort of warcraft, but he was permitted to land.

"Well, well, it's young Gibson!" the Chairman of Nessus greeted him, after the newcomer had passed through the exhaustive screening designed

to protect the elaborate underground headquarters. "I trust you have news for us, my boy. Watch outside the door, Colonel!"

One of the ostentatiously armed guards stepped outside and closed the door as Gibson greeted the obese man sitting across the button-studded expanse of desk. The scientist was under no illusion as to the vagueness of the title "Chairman." He was facing the absolute power of the Centaurian planets--which, in a few months' time, would be the same as saying the ruler of all the human race in both systems. Gibson's file must have been available on the Chairman's desk telescreen within minutes of the reception of his recognition signal. He felt a thrill of admiration for the efficiency of the new states and their system of government.

He made it his business to report briefly and accurately, trusting that the plain facts of his feat would attract suitable recognition. They did. Chairman Diamond's sharp blue eyes glinted out of the fat mask of his features.

"Well done, my boy!" he grunted, with a joviality he did not bother trying to make sound overly sincere. "So they have it! You must see our men immediately, and point out where they have gone wrong. You may leave it to me to decide who has gone wrong!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Arnold Gibson shivered involuntarily before reminding himself that he had seen the correct answer proved before his eyes. He had stood there and watched--more, he had worked with them all his adult life--and he was the last whom the muddled fools would have suspected.

The officer outside the door, Colonel Korman, was recalled and given orders to escort Gibson to the secret state laboratories. He glanced briefly at the scientist when they had been let out through the complicated system of safeguards.

"We have to go to the second moon," he said expressionlessly. "Better sleep all you can on the way. Once you're there, the Chairman will be impatient for results!"

Gibson was glad, after they had landed on the satellite, that he had taken the advice. He was led from one underground lab to another, to compare Centaurian developments with Solarian. Finally, Colonel Korman appeared to extricate him, giving curt answers to such researchers as still had questions.

"Whew! Glad you got me out!" Gibson thanked him. "They've been picking my brain for two days straight!"

"I hope you can stay awake," retorted Korman with no outward sign of sympathy. "If you think you can't, say so now. I'll have them give you another shot. The Chairman is calling on the telescreen."

Gibson straightened.

\_Jealous snob!\_ he thought. \_Typical military fathead, and he knows I amount to more than any little colonel now. I was smart enough to fool all the so-called brains of the Solar System.\_

"I'll stay awake," he said shortly.

Chairman Diamond's shiny features appeared on the screen soon after Korman reported his charge ready.

"Speak freely," he ordered Gibson. "This beam is so tight and scrambled that no prying jackass could even tell that it is communication. Have you set us straight?"

"Yes, Your Excellency," replied Gibson. "I merely pointed out which of several methods the Solarians got to yield results. Your--our scientists were working on all possibilities, so it would have been only a matter of time."

"Which you have saved us," said Chairman Diamond. His ice-blue eyes glinted again. "I wish I could have seen the faces of Haas and Co-ordinator Evora, and the rest. You fooled them completely!"

Gibson glowed at the rare praise.

"I dislike bragging, Your Excellency," he said, "but they \_are\_ fools. I might very well have found the answer without them, once they had collected the data. My success shows what intelligence, well-directed after the manner of the new states of Centauri, can accomplish against inefficiency."

The Chairman's expression, masked by the fat of his face, nevertheless approached a smile.

"So you would say that you--one of \_our\_ sympathizers--were actually the most intelligent worker \_they\_ had?"

\_He'll have his little joke\_, thought Gibson, \_and I'll let him put it over. Then, even that sour colonel will laugh with us, and the Chairman will hint about what post I'll get as a reward. I wouldn't mind being in charge--old Haas' opposite number at this end.\_

"I think I might indeed be permitted to boast of that much ability, Your Excellency," he answered, putting on what he hoped was an expectant

smile. "Although, considering the Solarians, that is not saying much."

The little joke did not develop precisely as anticipated.

"Unfortunately," Chairman Diamond said, maintaining his smile throughout, "wisdom should never be confused with intelligence."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gibson waited, feeling his own smile stiffen as he wondered what could be going wrong. Surely, they could not doubt \_his\_ loyalty! A hasty glance at Colonel Korman revealed no expression on the military facade affected by that gentleman.

"For if wisdom \_were\_ completely synonymous with intelligence," the obese Chairman continued, relishing his exposition, "you would be a rival to myself, and consequently would be--disposed of--anyway!"

Such a tingle shot up Gibson's spine that he was sure he must have jumped.

"\_Anyway?\_" he repeated huskily. His mouth suddenly seemed dry.

Chairman Diamond smiled out of the telescreen, so broadly that Gibson was unpleasantly affected by the sight of his small, gleaming, white teeth.

"Put it this way," he suggested suavely. "Your highly trained mind observed, correlated, and memorized the most intricate data and mathematics, meanwhile guiding your social relations with your former colleagues so as to remain unsuspected while stealing their most cherished secret. Such a feat demonstrates ability and intelligence."

Gibson tried to lick his lips, and could not, despite the seeming fairness of the words. He sensed a pulsing undercurrent of cruelty and cynicism.

"On the other hand," the mellow voice flowed on, "having received the information, being able to use it effectively now without you, and knowing that you betrayed \_once\_--I shall simply discard you like an old message blank. \_That\_ is an act of wisdom.

"Had you chosen your course more wisely," he added, "your position might be stronger."

By the time Arnold Gibson regained his voice, the Centaurian autocrat was already giving instructions to Colonel Korman. The scientist strove to interrupt, to attract the ruler's attention even momentarily.

Neither paid him any heed, until he shouted and tried frenziedly to shove the soldier from in front of the telescreen. Korman backhanded him across the throat without looking around, with such force that Gibson staggered back and fell.

He lay, half-choking, grasping his throat with both hands until he could breathe. The colonel continued discussing his extinction without emotion.

"... so if Your Excellency agrees, I would prefer taking him back to Nessus first, for the sake of the morale factor here. Some of them are so addled now at having been caught chasing up wrong alleys that they can hardly work."

Apparently the Chairman agreed, for the screen was blank when the colonel reached down and hauled Gibson to his feet.

"Now, listen to me carefully!" he said, emphasizing his order with a ringing slap across Gibson's face. "I shall walk behind you with my blaster drawn. If you make a false move, I shall not kill you."

Gibson stared at him, holding his bleeding mouth.

"It will be much worse," Korman went on woodenly. "Imagine what it will be like to have both feet charred to the bone. You would have to crawl the rest of the way to the ship; I certainly would not consider carrying you!"

In a nightmarish daze, Gibson obeyed the cold directions, and walked slowly along the underground corridors of the Centaurian research laboratories. He prayed desperately that someone--anyone--might come along. Anybody who could possibly be used to create a diversion, or to be pushed into Korman and his deadly blaster.

The halls remained deserted, possibly by arrangement.

Maybe I'd better wait till we reach his ship, Gibson thought. I ought to be able to figure a way before we reach Nessus. I had the brains to fool Haas and ...

He winced, recalling Chairman Diamond's theory of the difference between intelligence and wisdom.

The obscene swine! he screamed silently.

Colonel Korman grunted warningly, and Gibson took the indicated turn.

They entered the spaceship from an underground chamber, and Gibson learned the reason for his executioner's assurance when the latter

chained him to one of the pneumatic acceleration seats. The chain was fragile in appearance, but he knew he would not be free to move until Korman so desired.

\_More of their insane brand of cleverness!\_ he reflected. \_That's the sort of thing they do succeed in thinking of. They're all crazy! Why did I ever ...\_

But he shrank from the question he feared to answer. To drag out into the open his petty, selfish reasons, shorn of the tinsel glamor of so-called "service" and "progress," would be too painful.

\* \* \* \* \*

After the first series of accelerations, he roused himself from his beaten stupor enough to note that Korman was taking a strange course for reaching Nessus. Then, entirely too close to the planet and its satellites to ensure accuracy, the colonel put the ship into subspace drive.

Korman leaned back at the conclusion of the brief activity on his control board, and met Gibson's pop-eyed stare.

"Interesting, the things worth knowing," he commented. "How to make a weapon, for instance, or whether your enemy has it yet."

He almost smiled at his prisoner's expression.

"Or even better: knowing exactly how far your enemy has progressed and how fast he can continue, whether to stop him immediately or whether you can remain a step ahead."

"B-but--if both sides are irresistible ..." Gibson stammered.

Korman examined him contemptuously.

"No irresistible weapon exists, or ever will!" he declared. "Only an irresistible \_process\_-the transmission of secrets! You are living proof that no safeguards can defend against \_that\_."

He savored Gibson's silent discomfort.

"I am sure you know how far and how fast the Centaurian scientists will go, Gibson, since I guided you to every laboratory in that plant. Your memory may require some painful jogging when we reach the Solar System; \_but remember you shall\_!"

"But you--you were ordered to ..."

"You didn't think I was a Centaurian, did you?" sneered Korman. "After I just explained to you \_what\_ is really irresistible?"

THE END

*Transcriber's Note:*

*This etext was produced from \_If Worlds of Science Fiction\_ July 1953. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.*

End of Project Gutenberg's *Irresistible Weapon*, by Horace Brown Fyfe

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## Welcome, Martians!

By S. A. Lombino

*Only one question seemed important in this huge space venture:  
Who was flying where?*

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *Worlds of If Science Fiction*, May 1952. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

The only sound was the swish of the jets against the sand as the big ship came down. Slowly, nose pointed skyward, a yellow tail streaming out behind the tubes, it settled to the ground like a cat nuzzling its haunches against a velvet pillow.

Dave Langley peered through the viewport.

"I feel kind of funny," he said.

A tremor of excitement flooded through Cal Manners' thin frame. "Mars," he whispered. "We made it."



Gently, the fins probed the sand, poking into it. Cal cut the power and the big ship shuddered and relaxed, a huge metal spider with a conical head.

Cal peered through the viewport, his eyes scanning the planet. Behind him, Dave shrugged into a space suit, gathered up his instruments.

"I'll make the tests," Dave said. "Keep the starboard guns trained on me."

Cal nodded. He walked Dave to the airlock and lifted the toggles on the inner hatch. Dave stepped into the small chamber, and Cal snapped the hatch shut.

He walked quickly to the starboard guns, wiggled into the plastic seat behind them and pitched his shoulders against the braces. Outside, like a grotesque balloon, Dave stumbled around on weighted feet, taking his readings.

\_What's out there?\_ Cal wondered. \_Just exactly what?\_

He tightened his grip on the big blasters, and trained the guns around to where Dave pattered in the sand. Dave suddenly stood erect, waved at Cal, and started lumbering back toward the ship. Cal left the guns and went to the airlock. He stepped into the chamber closed the toggles on the hatch behind him, and twirled the wheel on the outer hatch. He was ready to move back into the ship again when Dave stepped through the outer hatch, his helmet under his arm.

"It's okay, Cal. Breathable atmosphere. And the pressure is all right, too."

Cal let out a sigh of relief. "Come on," he said. "Get out of that monkey suit. Then we'll claim the planet for Earth."

They went back into the ship, and Dave took off the suit, hanging it carefully in its locker. Both men strapped on holsters and drew stun guns from the munitions locker. They checked the charges in their weapons, holstered them, and stepped out into the Martian night.

It was cold, but their clothing was warm and the air was invigorating. Cal looked up at the sky.

"Phobos," he said, pointing.

"And Deimos," Dave added.

"Ike and Mike."

"Yeah." Dave smiled.

"How do you feel, Dave?" Cal asked suddenly.

"How do you mean?"

"Mars. I mean, we're the first men to land on Mars. The first, Dave!"

They were walking aimlessly, in no particular hurry.

"It's funny," Dave said. "I told you before. I feel kind of--"

\* \* \* \* \*

The music started abruptly, almost exploded into being, tore through the silence of the planet like the strident scream of a wounded animal. Trumpets blasted raucously, trombones moaned and slid, bass drums pounded a steady tattoo. Tubas, heavy and solemn like old men belching. Clarinets, shrill and squealing. Cymbals clashing.

A military band blaring its march into the night.

"Wha--"

Dave's mouth hung open. He stared into the distance.

There were lights, and the brass gleamed dully. A group of men were marching toward them, blowing on their horns, waving brilliant banners in the air.

"People," Cal said.

"And music. Like ours. \_Music just like ours.\_"

The procession spilled across the sand like an unravelling spool of brightly colored silk. Children danced on the outskirts of the group, hopping up and down, screaming in glee. Women waved banners, sang along with the band. And the music shouted out across the sand, a triumphal march with a lively beat.

A fat man led the procession. He was beaming, his smile a great enamelled gash across his face. The music became louder, closer, ear-shattering now.

"Welcome," the shouts rang out. "Welcome."

"Welcome!"

"English!" The word escaped Dave's lips in a sudden hiss. "For God's

sake, Cal, they're speaking English."

"Something's wrong," Cal said tightly. "This isn't Mars. We've made a mistake, Dave."

The fat man was closer now, still grinning, his stomach protruding, a gold watch hanging across his vest beneath his jacket. He wore a white carnation in his buttonhole. A homburg, black, was perched solidly atop his head.

"They're human," Dave whispered.

The fat man stopped before them, raised his hands. The music ceased as abruptly as it had begun. He stepped forward and extended his hand.

"Welcome home," he said.

Welcome \_home\_! The words seared across Cal's mind with sudden understanding.

"There's some mistake ..." he started.

"Mistake?" The fat man chuckled. "Nonsense, nonsense. I am Mayor Panley. You're back in New Calleth, gentlemen. The city is yours. The \_world\_ is yours! Welcome home."

"You don't understand," Cal persisted. "We've just come from Earth. We've just travelled more than 50,000,000 miles through space. We're from Earth."

"I know," the mayor said, "I know."

"You know?"

"But of course. Isn't it wonderful?"

The crowd cheered behind him, telling the night how wonderful it was.

Cal blinked, turned to Dave. The mayor put his arms about the two men. "We've been watching your approach for weeks. I'll have to admit we were a little worried in the beginning."

"Worried?"

The mayor began chuckling again. "Why yes, yes. Not that we didn't think you'd make it. But there were some who ... ahh, here are the television trucks now."

The trucks wheeled across the sand, just like the thousands of trucks

Cal had seen back on Earth. The television cameras pointed down at them, and the men stood behind them with earphones on.

"Smile. Smile," the mayor whispered.

Cal smiled. Dave smiled, too.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Mayor Panley said to the cameras, "It is the distinct honor of New Calleth...."

The crowd raised their voices, drowning out his voice. The banners waved, yellow, red, blue, orange. Welcome, welcome, welcome.

"... the distinct honor of New Calleth to be able to welcome home Bobby Galus and Gary Dale."

"Galus! Dale!" the voices sang, "Galus! Dale!"

"Galus!"

"Dale!"

"Just a second," Cal interrupted. "You don't understand at all. Those aren't our...."

"Four years in space," the mayor continued, "four years among the stars. To Earth and back, fellow citizens, for the glory of Mars."

"You've got that twisted," Cal said. "We didn't...."

The mayor took Cal's elbow and turned him toward the cameras.

"You were in space for four years, weren't you Captain Galus?"

"Yes, we were. But it wasn't...."

"Space!" the mayor gushed. "Limitless space. The first men to land on Earth."

Again the cries of the crowd split the night.

"Across the stretches of sky," the mayor continued. "Across the uncharted wilderness above, across the...."

\* \* \* \* \*

There were banquets and more banquets, and women of every size and shape. The city of New Calleth went all out to welcome the space travellers. Bobby Galus and Gary Dale.

At the end of a week of festivity, the mayor came to Cal and Dave.

"Have you enjoyed your stay, boys?" he asked.

"It was swell," Cal said, "but you've got things all...."

"I was wondering when you planned on leaving for the capitol. Don't misunderstand me. We'd like you to stay as long as you want to, but...."

"For God's sake," Cal snapped, "will you please listen to me?"

Mayor Panley was visibly shaken. "Why, of course, Captain Galus. Of course. Why, certainly."

He lapsed into silence.

"I'm not Bobby Galus," Cal said. "And this isn't Gary Dale."

The mayor nodded his head. "You're ... not ... Galus and Dale," he said slowly.

"That's right," Cal said. "We didn't go to Earth. We came from there. This is the first time we've ever been on Mars. Do you understand? We're Earthmen."

"Earthmen?" The mayor considered this for a second and then burst out laughing. "Why, that's preposterous. Absolutely preposterous!" His laugh rose in volume to a bellow. "Oh, you're joking. I should have known. You're only joking."

"We're not joking. This is all some kind of a horrible mistake. We're the first men to land on Mars. You've got to understand that," Dave pleaded.

The mayor was still laughing. He walked to the door and opened it. "All right, boys, have your little joke. You've earned the right to it. I'll make arrangements for you to leave for Dome City in the morning." He shook his head and chuckled again. "Earthmen. Tch-tch." And then he was gone.

They sat alone in the hotel room. It looked like any Earth hotel they'd ever been in. A big soft bed. A wall telephone. Two dressers. Two armchairs. A big mirror over one of the dressers. A television set on the other dresser.

"This is screwy," Dave said. "Is it possible we're back on Earth? Is it possible the joke is on us? Maybe everyone is just ribbing us. Maybe we've been going around in circles for four years. Maybe...."

"No," Cal said. "We're on Mars all right. I don't know exactly how to explain it, but I've got an idea."

"What's that?" Dave asked.

Cal shrugged. "Probably all wrong, of course. But it has something to do with comparable development of cultures on different planets."

"You mean Mars is in exactly the same state of development as Earth?"

"Something like that. You know the theory. Give two different places the same materials to start with, and their cultures will run parallel to each other for the rest of their existence."

"Sure," Dave said. "But these guys Galus and Dale. How the hell could we possibly be mistaken for them?"

"I don't know." Cal leaned back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "Maybe we'll find out in Dome City."

"Maybe," Dave repeated hollowly.

\* \* \* \* \*

The president of the planet greeted their ship in Dome City. There were more parades, banners, bands, banquets, reporters, cameras, confetti, women, speeches, presentations.

And at last, they stood before the President's desk, two bodyguards standing on either side of him. He was a thin man, slightly balding, with rimless glasses.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I don't have to tell you how pleased I am."

Cal took a deep breath. "We've been trying to tell Mayor Panley," he said, "that we are not Galus and Dale."

The President smiled. "I know. He told me of your little joke."

"It's not a joke."

The President cocked an eyebrow. "No?" He looked at his bodyguards. "Has space affec ... did you feel any ill effects in space?" he asked.

Cal grimaced. "Oh great! Now he thinks we're psycho. Look, can't you get this through your heads? \_ We are from Earth.\_ We never heard of Galus and Dale. My name is Calvin Manners, and this is David Langley."

"Very interesting," the President said. He tapped his finger on the back of his other hand and stared at the two Earthmen.

He reached over toward the intercom on his desk then and pressed a button.

"Yes?" a woman's voice asked.

"Miss Daniels, will you bring in the photos of Capt. Galus and Lt. Dale, please?"

"Yes, sir."

The President turned to the two men again. "Those are your ranks, are they not?"

"Yes, but we're in the United States Army."

"The \_what\_?"

"The United States Army. The United States is a country on Earth."

"Really? Now we're getting somewhere. What else does Earth have? What is it like? Are the inhabitants intelligent?"

"Yes, we are. \_We're\_ Earthmen, can't you understand that?"

"I think you're carrying this joke a little too far, gentlemen. A joke is a joke, but we've spent millions of dollars on your trip. Really, this is no time for banter."

Cal opened his mouth, ready to protest, just as the outside door swung wide. An attractive blonde in a smart suit stepped into the room and walked to the President's desk. She kept her eyes glued to the two Earthmen, dropped two large photographs on the desk, and turned. She stared over her shoulder at Cal and Dave until she was gone.

The President smiled knowingly. "The women are falling all over you two, I imagine."

"We're both married," Cal said drily. "We don't care for all this...."

"Married?" The President was shocked. "I thought we'd distinctly chosen unmarried men for the job. Strange."

"We've got wives on Earth," Dave said.

"Ah-ha," the President said. "Then they are intelligent beings. Pity, pity."

A twinge of anticipation curled up Cal's spine. "Pity? Why a pity? Why do you say that?"

"Well, you know. Surely you realized this was the only flight we could afford."

"What?"

"For the meantime, anyway. We may attempt another flight in fifty years, sixty perhaps, maybe more. But you've already proved space travel, Capt. Galus. The achievement is ours. All we need now is money to...."

"Damn it, I'm not Capt. Galus," Cal shouted. "And we've got to get back to Earth. I've got a kid, Mr. President. He's six years old and...." Cal stopped abruptly. "Oh, this is all nonsense. Why am I arguing with you? Can't you understand that we are Earthmen? What do we have to do to prove it?"

The President sighed and turned over the photographs on the desk. They were glossy prints of two men in uniform. They were young men, in khaki, smiles on their faces.

One man looked exactly like Calvin Manners.

The other strongly resembled David Langley.

"Here are your photographs," the President said. "This is you, captain, and you, lieutenant. They were taken before the trip. You're younger, of course."

Cal stared at the photograph. It could have been he. The nose was a little sharper, perhaps, and the face thinner. But it could have been he. \_It could have been he!\_

"It's a freak accident," he shouted. "A coincidence in two parallel cultures, a...."

He saw the look on the President's face then. It was a cold look, and a suspicious one. Cal stopped speaking, sweat staining the armpits of his uniform shirt.

The President grinned again. "That's better. I understand the strain of space, gentlemen, but we must be practical, mustn't we?"

He paused. "Shall we talk about Earth now?"

\* \* \* \*



The only sound was the swish of the jets against the grass as the big ship came down. Slowly, nose pointed skyward, a yellow tail streaming out behind the tubes, it settled to the ground like a cat nuzzling its haunches against a velvet pillow.

In the distance, the lights of New York danced crazily, gleaming from a thousand spires that scratched the sky. The radios blared forth excitedly, and the police cars screamed through the night as they rushed to City Hall to pick up the mayor.

Inside the ship, Gary Dale peered through the viewport.

"I feel kind of funny," he said.

A tremor of excitement flooded through Bobby Galus' thin frame.

"Earth," he whispered. "We made it."

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## OPERATION DISTRESS

By Lester Del Rey

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*Explorers who dread spiders and snakes prove that heroism  
is always more heroic to outsiders. Then there's the case  
of the first space pilot to Mars who developed the itch--*

Bill Adams was halfway back from Mars when he noticed the red rash on his hands. He'd been reaching for one of the few remaining tissues to cover a sneeze, while scratching vigorously at the base of his neck. Then he saw the red spot, and his hand halted, while all desire to sneeze gasped out of him.

He sat there, five feet seven inches of lean muscle and bronzed skin, sweating and staring, while the blond hair on the back of his neck seemed to stand on end. Finally he dropped his hand and pulled himself carefully erect. The cabin in the spaceship was big enough to permit turning around, but not much more, and with the ship cruising without power, there was almost no gravity to keep him from overshooting his goal.

He found the polished plate that served as a mirror and studied himself. His eyes were puffy, his nose was red, and there were other red splotches and marks on his face.

Whatever it was, he had it bad!

Pictures went through his head, all unpleasant. He'd been only a kid when the men came back from the South Pacific in the last war; but an uncle had spent years dying of some weird disease that the doctors couldn't identify. That had been from something caught on Earth. What would happen when the disease was from another planet?

It was ridiculous. Mars had no animal life, and even the thin lichenlike plants were sparse and tiny. A man couldn't catch a disease from a plant. Even horses didn't communicate their ills to men. Then Bill remembered gangrene and cancer, which could attack any life, apparently.

He went back to the tiny Geiger-Muller counter, but there was no sign of radiation from the big atomic motor that powered the ship. He stripped his clothes off, spotting more of the red marks breaking out, but finding no sign of parasites. He hadn't really believed it, anyhow. That wouldn't account for the sneezing and sniffles, or the puffed eyes and burning inside his nose and throat.

Dust, maybe? Mars had been dusty, a waste of reddish sand and desert silt that made the Sahara seem like paradise, and it had settled on his spacesuit, to come in through the airlocks with him. But if it contained some irritant, it should have been worse on Mars than now. He could remember nothing annoying, and he'd turned on the tiny, compact little static dust traps, in any case, before leaving, to clear the air.

He went back to one of the traps now, and ripped the cover off it.

The little motor purred briskly. The plastic rods turned against fur brushes, while a wiper cleared off any dust they picked up. There was no dust he could see; the traps had done their work.

Some plant irritant, like poison ivy? No, he'd always worn his suit--Mars had an atmosphere, but it wasn't anything a man could

breathe long. The suit was put on and off with automatic machine grapples, so he couldn't have touched it.

The rash seemed to get worse on his body as he looked at it. This time, he tore one of the tissues in quarters as he sneezed. The little supply was almost gone; there was never space enough for much beyond essentials in a spaceship, even with the new atomic drive. As he looked for spots, the burning in his nose seemed to increase.

He dropped back to the pilot seat, cursing. Two months of being cramped up in this cubicle, sweating out the trip to Mars without knowing how the new engine would last; three weeks on Mars, mapping frantically to cover all the territory he could, and planting little flags a hundred miles apart; now a week on the trip back at high acceleration most of the way--and this! He'd expected adventure of some kind. Mars, though, had proved as interesting as a sandpile, and even the "canals" had proved to be only mineral striations, invisible from the ground.

He looked for something to do, but found nothing. He'd developed his films the day before, after carefully cleaning the static traps and making sure the air was dust-free. He'd written up the accounts. And he'd been coasting along on the hope of getting home to a bath, a beer, and a few bull sessions, before he began to capitalize on being the first man to reach another planet beyond the Moon.

He cut on full acceleration again, more certain of his motors than of himself. He'd begun to notice the itching yesterday; today he was breaking out in the rash. How long would whatever was coming take? Good God, he might die--from something as humiliating and undramatic as this!

It hadn't hit him before, fully. There was no knowing about diseases from other planets. Men had developed immunity to the germs found on Earth; but just as smallpox had proved so fatal to the Indians and syphilis to Europe when they first hit, there was no telling how wildly this might progress. It might go away in a day, or it might kill him just as quickly.

He was figuring his new orbit on a tiny calculator. In two days at this acceleration, he could reach radar-distance of Earth; in four, he could land. The tubes might burn out in continuous firing. But the other way, he'd be two weeks making a landing, and most diseases he could remember seemed faster than that.

Bill wiped the sweat off his forehead, scratched at other places that were itching, and stared down at the small disk of Earth. There were doctors there--and, brother, he'd need them fast!

Things were a little worse when the first squeals came from the radar two days later. He'd run out of tissues, and his nose was a continual

drip, while breathing seemed almost impossible. He was running some fever, too, though he had no way of knowing how much.

He cut his receiver in, punched out the code on his key. The receiver pipped again at him, bits of message getting through, but unclearly. There was no response to his signals. He checked his chronometer and flipped over the micropages of his Ephemeris; the big radar at Washington was still out of line with him, and the signals had to cut through too much air to come clearly. It should be good in another hour.

But right now, an hour seemed longer than a normal year. He checked the dust tray again, tried figuring out other orbits, managed to locate the Moon, and scratched. Fifteen minutes. There was no room for pacing up and down. He pushed the back down from the pilot seat, lowered the table, and pulled out his bunk; he remade it, making sure all the corners were perfect. Then he folded it back and lifted the table and seat. That took less than five minutes.

His hands were shaking worse when the automatic radar signals began to come through more clearly. It wasn't an hour, but he could wait no longer. He opened the key and began to send. It would take fifteen seconds for the signal to reach Earth, and another quarter minute for an answer, even if an operator was on duty.

Half a minute later, he found one was. "Earth to Mars Rocket I. Thank God, you're ahead of schedule. If your tubes hold out, crowd them. Two other nations have ships out now. The U. N. has ruled that whoever comes back first with mapping surveys can claim the territory mapped. We're rushing the construction, but we need the ship for the second run if we're to claim our fair territory. Aw, hell--congratulations!"

He'd started hammering at his key before they finished, giving the facts on the tubes, which were standing up beyond all expectations. "And get a doctor ready--a bunch of them," he finished. "I seem to have picked up something like a disease."

There was a long delay before an answer came this time--more than five minutes. The hand on the key was obviously different, slower and not as steady. "What symptoms, Adams? Give all details!"

He began, giving all the information he had, from the first itching through the rash and the fever. Again, longer this time, the main station hesitated.

"Anything I can do about it now?" Bill asked, finally. "And how about having those doctors ready?"

"We're checking with Medical," the signals answered. "We're.... Here's their report. Not enough data--could be anything. Dozens of diseases

like that. Nothing you can do, except try salt water gargle and spray; you've got stuff for that. Wash off rash with soap and hot water, followed by some of your hypo. We'll get a medical kit up to the Moon for you."

He let that sink in, then clicked back: "The \_Moon\_?"

"You think you can land here with whatever you've got, man? There's no way of knowing how contagious it is. And keep an hourly check with us. If you pass out, we'll try to get someone out in a Moon rocket to pick you up. But we can't risk danger of infecting the whole planet. You're quarantined on the Moon--we'll send up landing instructions later--not even for Luna Base, but where there will be no chance of contamination for others. You didn't really expect to come back here, did you, Adams?"

He should have thought of it. He knew that. And he knew that the words from Earth weren't as callous as they sounded. Down there, men would be sweating with him, going crazy trying to do something. But they were right. Earth had to be protected first; Bill Adams was only one out of two and a half billions, even if he had reached a planet before any other man.

Yeah, it was fine to be a hero. But heroes shouldn't menace the rest of the world.

Logically, he knew they were right. That helped him get his emotions under control. "Where do you want me to put down?"

"Tycho. It isn't hard to spot for radar-controlled delivery of supplies to you, but it's a good seven hundred miles from Lunar Base. And look--we'll try to get a doctor to you. But keep us informed if anything slips. We need those maps, if we can find a way to sterilize 'em."

"Okay," he acknowledged. "And tell the cartographers there are no craters, no intelligence, and only plants about half an inch high. Mars stinks."

They'd already been busy, he saw, as he teetered down on his jets for a landing on Tycho. Holding control was the hardest job he'd ever done. A series of itchings cropped out just as the work got tricky, when he could no longer see the surface, and had to go by feel. But somehow he made it. Then he relaxed and began an orgy of scratching.

And he'd thought there was something romantic about being a hero!

The supplies that had already been sent up by the superfast unmanned missiles would give him something to do, at least. He moved back the two feet needed to reach his developing tanks and went through the

process of spraying and gargling. It was soothing enough while it went on, but it offered only momentary help.

Then his stomach began showing distress signs. He fought against it, tightening up. It did no good. His hasty breakfast of just black coffee wanted to come up--and did, giving him barely time to make the little booth.

He washed his mouth out and grabbed for the radar key, banging out a report on this. The doctors must have been standing by down at the big station, because there was only a slight delay before the answering signal came: "Any blood?"

Another knot added itself to his intestines. "I don't know--don't think so, but I didn't look."

"Look, next time. We're trying to get this related to some of the familiar diseases. It must have some relation--there are only so many ways a man can be sick. We've got a doctor coming over, Adams. None on the Moon, but we're shipping him through. He'll set down in about nine hours. And there's some stuff to take on the supply missiles. May not help, but we're trying a mixture of the antibiotics. Also some ACS and anodynes for the itching and rash. Hope they work. Let us know any reaction."

Bill cut off. He'd have to try. They were as much in the dark about this as he was, but they had a better background for guessing and trial and error. And if the bugs in him happened to like tachiomycetin, he wouldn't be too much worse off. Damn it, had there been blood?

He forced his mind off it, climbed into his clothes and then into the spacesuit that hung from the grapples. It moved automatically into position, the two halves sliding shut and sealing from outside. The big gloves on his hands were too clumsy for such operations.

Then he went bounding across the Moon. Halfway to the supplies he felt the itching come back, and he slithered and wriggled around, trying to scratch his skin against his clothing. It didn't help much. He was sweating harder, and his eyes were watering. He manipulated the little visor-cleaning gadget, trying to poke his face forward to brush the frustration tears from his eyes. He couldn't quite reach it.

There were three supply missiles, each holding about two hundred pounds, Earth weight. He tied them together and slung them over his back, heading toward his ship. Here they weighed only a hundred pounds, and with his own weight and the suit added, the whole load came to little more than his normal weight on Earth.

He tried shifting the supplies around on his back, getting them to

press against the spots of torment as he walked. It simply unbalanced him, without really relieving the itching. Fortunately, though, his eyes were clearing a little. He gritted his teeth and fought back through the powdery pumice surface, kicking up clouds of dust that settled slowly but completely--though the gravity was low, there was no air to hold them up.

Nothing had ever looked better than the airlock of the ship. He let the grapples hook the suit off him as soon as the outer seal was shut and went into a whirling dervish act. Aches and pains could be stood--but itching !

Apparently, though, the spray and gargle had helped a little, since his nose felt somewhat clearer and his eyes were definitely better. He repeated them, and then found the medical supplies, with a long list of instructions.

They were really shooting the pharmacy at him. He injected himself, swallowed things, rubbed himself down with others, and waited. Whatever they'd given him didn't offer any immediate help. He began to feel worse. But on contacting Earth by radar, he was assured that that might be expected.

"We've got another missile coming, with metal foil for the maps and photos--plus a small copying camera. You can print them right on the metal, seal that in a can, and leave it for the rocket that's bringing the doctor. The pilot will blast over it--that should sterilize it--and pick it up when it cools."

Bill swore, but he was in his suit when the missile landed, heading out across the pumice-covered wastes toward it. The salves had helped the itching a little, but not much. And his nose had grown worse again.

He jockeyed the big supply can out of the torpedo-shaped missile, packed it on his back, and headed for his ship. The itching was acting up as he sweated--this made a real load, about like packing a hundred bulky pounds over his normal Earth weight through the soft drift of the pumice. But his nose was clearing again; it was apparently becoming cyclic. He'd have to relay that information back to the medics. And where were they getting a doctor crazy enough to take a chance with him?

He climbed out of the suit and went through the ritual of scratching, noticing that his fever had gone up, and that his muscles were shaking. His head seemed light, as if he were in for a spell of dizziness. They'd be interested in that, back on Earth, though it wouldn't do much good. He couldn't work up a clinical attitude about himself. All he wanted was a chance to get over this disease before it killed him.

He dragged out the photo and copying equipment, under a red light.

It filled what little space was left in his cubbyhole cabin. Then he swore, gulping down more of the pills where they were waiting for him. The metal sheets were fine. They were excellent. The only thing wrong was that they wouldn't fit his developing trays--and they were tough enough to give him no way of cutting them to size.

He stuffed them back in their container and shoved it into the airlock. Then his stomach kicked up again. He couldn't see any blood in the result, but he couldn't be sure--the color of the pills might hide traces. He flushed it down, his head turning in circles, and went to the radar. This time he didn't even wait for a reply; let them worry about their damned maps. They could send cutting equipment with the doctor and pick up the things later. They could pick up his corpse and cremate it at the same time, for all he cared right now.

He yanked out his bunk and slumped into it, curling up as much as the itching would permit. And finally, for the first time in over fifty hours, he managed to doze off, though his sleep was full of nightmares.

It was the sound of the bull-throated chemical rocket that brought him out of it--the sound traveling along the surface through the rocks and up through the metal ship, even without air to carry it.

He could feel the rumble of its takeoff later, but he waited long after that for the doctor. There was no knock on the port. Finally he pulled himself up from the bunk, sweating and shaken, and looked out.

The doctor was there--or at least a man in a spacesuit was. But somebody had been in a hurry for volunteers, and given the man no basic training at all. The figure would pull itself erect, make a few strides that were all bounce and no progress, and then slide down into the pumice. Moon-walking was tricky until you learned how.

Bill sighed, scratching unconsciously, and made his way somehow out to his suit, climbing into it. He paused for a final good scratch, and then the grapples took over. This time, he stumbled also as he made his way across the powdery rubble. But the other man was making no real progress at all.

Bill reached him, and touched helmets long enough to issue simple instructions through metal sound conduction. Then he managed to guide the other's steps; there had been accounts of the days of learning spent by the first men on the Moon, but it wasn't that bad with an instructor to help. The doctor picked up as they went along. Bill's legs were buckling under him by then, and the itches were past endurance. At the end, the doctor was helping him. But somehow they made the ship, and were getting out of the suits--Bill first, then the doctor, using the grapples under Bill's guidance.



The doctor was young, and obviously scared, but fighting his fear. He'd been picked for his smallness to lighten the load on the chemical rocket, and his little face was intent. But he managed a weak grin.

"Thanks, Adams. I'm Doctor Ames--Ted to you. Get onto that cot. You're about out on your feet."

The test he made didn't take long, but his head was shaking at the conclusion.

"Your symptoms make no sense," he summarized. "I've got a feeling some are due to one thing, some to another. Maybe we'll have to wait until I come down with it and compare notes."

His grin was wry, but Bill was vaguely glad that he wasn't trying any bedside manner. There wasn't much use in thanking the man for volunteering--Ames had known what he was up against, and he might be scared, but his courage was above thanks.

"What about the maps?" Bill asked. "They tell you?"

"They've left cutters outside. I started to bring them. Then the pumice got me--I couldn't stand upright in it. They'll pick up the maps later, but they're important. The competing ships will claim our territory if we don't file first."

He knocked the dust off his instrument, and wiped his hands. Bill looked down at the bed to see a fine film of Moon silt there. They'd been bringing in too much on the suits--it was too fine, and the traps weren't getting it fast enough.

He got up shakily, moving toward the dust trap that had been running steadily. But now it was out of order, obviously, with the fur brushes worn down until they could generate almost no static against the rod. He groped into the supplies, hoping there would be replacements.

Ames caught his arm. "Cut it out, Adams. You're in no shape for this. Hey, how long since you've eaten?"

Bill thought it over, his head thick. "I had coffee before I landed."

Doctor Ames nodded quickly. "Vomiting, dizziness, tremors, excess sweating--what did you expect, man? You put yourself under this strain, not knowing what comes next, having to land with an empty stomach, skipping meals and loading your stomach with pills--and probably no sleep! Those symptoms are perfectly normal."

He was at the tiny galley equipment, fixing quick food as he spoke. But his face was still sober. He was probably thinking of the same thing

that worried Bill--an empty stomach didn't make the itching rash, the runny nose and eyes, and the general misery that had begun the whole thing.

He sorted through the stock of replacement parts, a few field-sisters, suit wadding, spare gloves, cellophane-wrapped gadgets. Then he had it. Ames was over, urging him toward the cot, but he shook him off.

"Got to get the dust out of here--dust'll make the itching worse. Moon dust is sharp, Doc. Just install new brushes.... Where are those instructions? Yeah, insert the cat's fur brushes under the.... \_Cat\_'s fur? Is \_that\_ what they use, Doc?"

"Sure. It's cheap and generates static electricity. Do you expect sable?"

Bill took the can of soup and sipped it without tasting or thinking, his hand going toward a fresh place that itched. His nose began running, but he disregarded it. He still felt lousy, but strength was flowing through him, and life was almost good again.

He tossed the bunk back into its slot, lifted the pilot's stool, and motioned Ames forward. "You operate a key--hell, I \_am\_ getting slow. You can contact Luna Base by phone, have them relay. There. Now tell 'em I'm blasting off pronto for Earth, and I'll be down in four hours with their plans."

"You're crazy." The words were flat, but there was desperation on the little doctor's face. He glanced about hastily, taking the microphone woodenly. "Adams, they'll have an atomic bomb up to blast you out before you're near Earth. They've got to protect themselves. You can't...."

Bill scratched, but there was the beginning of a grin on his face. "Nope, I'm not delirious now, though I damn near cracked up. You figured out half the symptoms. Take a look at those brushes--cat's fur brushes--and figure what they'll do to a man who was breathing the air and who is allergic to cats! All I ever had was some jerk in Planning who didn't check my medical record with trip logistics! I never had these symptoms until I unzipped the traps and turned 'em on. It got better whenever I was in the suit, breathing canned air. We should have known a man can't catch a disease from plants."

The doctor looked at him, and at the fur pieces he'd thrown into a wastebin, and the whiteness ran from his face. He was seeing his own salvation, and the chuckle began weakly, gathering strength as he turned to the microphone.

"Cat asthma--simple allergy. Who'd figure you'd get that in deep space?"

But you're right, Bill. It figures."

Bill Adams nodded as he reached for the controls, and the tubes began firing, ready to take them back to Earth. Then he caught himself and swung to the doctor.

"Doc," he said quickly, "just be sure and tell them this isn't to get out. If they'll keep still about it, so will I."

He'd make a hell of a hero on Earth if people heard of it, and he could use a little of a hero's reward.

No catcalls, thanks.

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## LES MACHINES

By Joe Love

*There are human beings who function "like machines" and there are machines which seem to be "almost human". So--the problem in this case was not murder, or who committed it but who was the "machine" and who was the "human being".*

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from  
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On January 5, 1997 Isobel Smith became Isobel Smith d'Larte. On November 13, 1997 Isobel Smith d'Larte gave birth to a boy-child who died. And on March 20, 1998 Isobel Smith d'Larte was placed on trial for the willful and premeditated murder of her husband Arnaud d'Larte.

"Not Isobel," said her friends. "Not Isobel. Too mousey. So quiet. Surely it wasn't Isobel."

"But it's the quiet type you've got to watch out for," said others.  
"Probably has a lover somewhere. She was younger than her husband you know. Much younger. Too much younger."

"Killed him for his money," said the people on the street. "Read where

she likes art and museums, stuff like that. Must be a queer one that Isobel d'Larte."

The accusations piled high against Isobel, but she said nothing. She sat in court, a tiny figure in black saying nothing, seemingly not even listening to the accusations of the Prosecutor.

"We will prove willful and premeditated murder," the Prosecutor thundered.

"Easily done," an old woman in the audience murmured spitefully. "Young wife, old husband. Rich husband. Murder! Easily proved."

"First witness," the Prosecutor called. "Sergeant Melot."

Sergeant Melot took the stand. The witness chair creaked under his weight. He answered a loud, "I do," when the clerk swore him in.

"Tell us about finding the body," the Prosecutor said. "Miss no details."

"A Mrs. Watson, servant of Arnaud d'Larte, called us at nine five P.M. on March 15. Her master was dead, she said. When we answered her call we found Mr. d'Larte's body in his bedroom. He had been dead for about an hour."

"The cause?"

"Beaten to death. Beaten with an iron statue of Venus. Evidence of a struggle. Twenty wounds on his head."

"Twenty wounds, Sergeant Melot?"

"Twenty. The first, or second, would have been enough to kill him. But there were twenty."

The audience gasped and the Prosecutor smiled. "And where was Mrs. d'Larte?" he asked.

"Locked in her bedroom. Had to break the door down to get to her."

"Did you speak to her?"

"We spoke to her, but she didn't speak to us."

The audience laughed and the judge rapped for silence.

"The iron statue of Venus, the one found near Mr. d'Larte's body, you found fingerprints on it, did you not?" Sergeant Melot nodded. "Whose

fingerprints were they, Sergeant Melot?"

"Mrs. d'Larte's."

"Your witness," the Prosecutor told the Defense.

"No questions," said the Defense.

"Why ask questions," a spectator commented. "She's guilty."

"Next witness."

"Mrs. Abby Watson to the stand please."

Abby Watson strode to the witness chair. Her shrew-like eyes flicked sharply towards Isobel d'Larte then away. Her answer to the clerk who swore her in was sharp and positive.

"How long have you worked for Mr. d'Larte?" the Prosecutor asked.

"Fifteen years."

"In your opinion Mr. d'Larte was a good employer?"

"The best. A wonderful man, but a lonely one. That woman tricked him into marriage. Played on his loneliness."

"Objection."

"Objection sustained. Confine yourself to the questions please."

"Mr. d'Larte was older than his wife?" the Prosecutor asked.

"Eighteen years older."

"Was it a happy marriage?"

"At first, at least on his part. He was contented, but she seemed restless. Always wanted to go to museums and see paintings, or playing her silly antique records all day. Not content with the government 'Do-It-Yourself' kits. Called them mechanical and expressionless. She insulted Mr. d'Larte's friends time and again. Called them frauds. Said their paintings, books and plays were terrible. Said that real talent was dead.

"You said she spent a lot of time in museums?"

"I didn't say it, but she did. Every chance she got. She'd be gone for hours."

"Which museum? The one commemorating the wars? The Museum of Mechanics?"

"None of those. She'd go to the old one on the hill. That horrible thing with the relics of the past in it. The one run by the robots. The one run by the government to remind us of the past when only a few were allowed talent and not everybody like today. But I think she went to the museum for another reason. No one could \_really\_ be interested in those things they have there."

"What do you think she went for, Mrs. Watson?"

"To meet her lover. Shortly before he was killed Mr. d'Larte confessed to me that he was of the same opinion."

"See, I told you she had a lover," someone whispered. "Old husband, young wife. I just knew there was a lover."

"Objection," said the Defense. "There is no proof that Mrs. d'Larte went to the museum to meet a lover. There are only opinions, guesses."

"If your honor will permit me to call my next witness I think I can prove that there was a lover," the Prosecutor said.

The judge leaned forward in eager anticipation. "Call your witness."

"Bella Whychek."

A fat, dumpy, flame-haired woman made her way to the witness stand. As she was sworn in she tugged self-consciously at her too tight girdle.

"Miss Whychek--"

"Mrs. ... I'm a widow."

"Mrs. Whychek, would you tell us where you are employed."

"Timon's and Sons. I'm a secretary there."

"And where is your office located."

"In the building just across the street from the Museum of the Past--the one you were just talking about to that other woman."

"Mrs. Whychek, do you recognize the woman sitting over there?" the Prosecutor asked as he pointed to Isobel d'Larte.

"Indeed I do. I saw her most everyday."

"Would you tell us the circumstances."

"Well, from the window in my office I have a very good view of the park that is next to the museum. About a month ago I began noticing that woman in the park. I couldn't help but notice her, she came so often."

"Alone, Mrs. Whyчек?"

"At first yes. She'd go into the museum, stay about two hours or so, then come out and sit in the park. She never did anything but sit."

"Was she always alone?"

"I was just coming to that. After about a week I noticed that a man would come and sit with her in the park."

"Could you describe the man?"

"No, I'm afraid I couldn't. He always wore a long overcoat and a hat pulled down over his face. Both the overcoat and the hat were very old though. I did notice that. They looked like they might have dated from around 1950."

"And what did this man and Mrs. d'Larte do in the park?"

"Just sat. Talked I guess. I never saw them kiss or anything if that's what you mean. Of course many times they would still be sitting there when I left work. What they did after that I don't know."

"But Mrs. d'Larte definitely did meet a man in the park."

"Oh, yes. She met him nearly every day for almost a month."

"Thank you. Your witness."

The Defense rose slowly and walked over to where Mrs. Whyчек sat.

"Remember you are under oath, Mrs. Whyчек," he said. "You say Mrs. d'Larte and this man merely sat and talked?"

"As far as I could tell that's all they did. Of course I didn't watch them every minute."

"Then you can say that they never did anything out of the way, that their meetings, if they were that, were innocent?"

"As far as I could tell they were."

"Could you say whether the meetings were prearranged?"

"I really couldn't, but--"

"That will be all, thank you," the Defense interrupted.

So the first day of the trial went. There seemed no doubt that Isobel d'Larte was guilty. Her friends admitted loudly that poor Isobel had scandalized them to the core. The papers labeled Isobel queer and hinted that her lover, whoever he might be, killed Mr. d'Larte for her. Old fashioned Isobel, they called her. Some had other names for her.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the second day of the trial the Defense called its witnesses. There were only three. Two were character witnesses who hesitantly assured the court that Isobel d'Larte could not have killed her husband. She really was a good woman.

The third witness was Isobel herself. When she was called she rose very slowly and walked to the witness stand. She was sworn in and seated herself in the witness chair. Her face and hands were chalk white against the blackness of her dress.

"Mrs. d'Larte, did you kill your husband?" the Defense asked.

"No."

"Do you know who did kill your husband?"

"No."

"Why did you lock yourself in your bedroom the night he was killed."

"I wanted to be alone."

The spectators giggled.

"Could you explain how your fingerprints came to be on the iron statue of Venus? The statue that killed your husband."

"It was my statue. It is quite possible that my fingerprints would be on it."

"And you heard nothing, no sounds of struggle, the night your husband was killed?"

"No. I slept awhile that night. I was tired so I locked my door and slept. I heard nothing."



"Do you know who would want to kill your husband?"

"An enemy I suppose."

"Did your husband have any enemies?"

"Of course, everyone does. Even God has enemies."

That shocked the spectators, but then Isobel had meant it to. Quite suddenly she found herself hating those in the packed court room. Hating these upright citizens who had come to delight in her misfortune. Who sat in smug holier-than-thou attitudes and hoped for the worst. Not one among them really cared what happened to her--as long as it entertained them. Isobel shivered.

"Could you be more specific about your husband's enemies?" the Defense asked.

"No. He never confided in me. He was only interested in his munitions factories. In machines. He loved machines. He particularly loved destructive machines. Some hated him for that."

"The man Mrs. Whychek said you met in the park. Was there such a man?"

Isobel twisted her handkerchief. It was a thin, white snake in her hands.

"Was there a man, Mrs. d'Larte?" the Defense repeated.

"There was a man."

"Could you tell us his name?"

"I do not know his name. He was a man I met in the park. He was a kind and gentle man. We talked about art, music--the beautiful old art and music. He was well informed about such things. We talked a lot, but I don't know his name. We just talked."

"Were you in love with this man, or he with you?"

"No! No!"

"You definitely were not lovers?"

"We were not!"

"Thank you, Mrs. d'Larte. Your witness."

The Prosecutor approached the witness stand. "Mrs. d'Larte, you do not

like the 'Do-It-Yourself' kits the government has put out, do you?"

"I do not."

"You do not approve or recognize the fact that today everyone is conceded to have talent, do you?"

"I do not."

"Why, Mrs. d'Larte?"

"Anyone can paint, but everyone isn't an artist. Anyone can write, but everyone isn't an author. Anyone can do anything, but everyone does not have talent."

"So you spent a great deal of your time in the Museum of the Past looking at the \_so-called\_ art treasures there?"

"Yes. They were worth looking at."

"And you did not use that to cover up the fact that you met your lover at the museum?"

"I do not have a lover."

"The man you met in the park, you just talked to him?"

"We talked about the wonderful, the beautiful things in the museum. He knew about them and loved them as I did. There was no one else I could talk to about them."

"Naturally," the Prosecutor sneered. "Everyone else knows what frauds they are."

The spectators laughed.

"Then I like the frauds," Isobel said quietly.

"You claim you were in your bedroom with the door locked and asleep when Mr. d'Larte was killed. Is that right?"

"That is right."

"And even though your bedroom is right next to Mr. d'Larte's you heard nothing. Is \_that\_ right?"

"Yes."

"Your husband struggled, struggled hard before he died, Mrs. d'Larte.

You'll forgive me if I seem skeptical of the fact that you heard nothing."

"I was asleep. I heard nothing."

"No cry? No crashes?"

"I heard nothing!"

"And the man in the park--he was not your lover?"

"He was not my lover."

The Prosecutor turned to the judge with a grim smile. "Your honor, I request a recess so that I may bring in a new witness."

"This witness is not in the court room?"

"No. I myself only learned of him a few minutes ago. It will take about a half-hour to bring him here."

"And this witness is important?"

"Yes. I believe he can prove that Mrs. d'Larte is lying."

"Then this court is recessed until the prosecution brings in the new witness."

The spectators buzzed and jibbered excitedly. A new witness. A surprise witness. The trial was really becoming interesting.

"I hate to leave. I really hate to leave," one said to her companion. "I'll never get back in if I leave. But one must eat. I hate to leave."

"No need. No need to leave," the companion assured her. "See, I brought sandwiches. Always bring something to eat to things like this. People crowd so. It's really terrible. Have an egg?"

"Pretty good trial," an old man with a white beard told the person next to him. "Not as good as the Bronson trial, but pretty good."

"You've seen a lot of trials?" the figure next to him asked.

"Seen all the good ones," the one with the beard said proudly. "Saw the Bronson trial in '96, the Treamont trial in '94. Saw a lot of trials. First time that I've seen one where a wife killed her husband. Most of the others involved infanticide. Good trials, you understand, but disappointing. All the verdicts were not guilty."

"Naturally. With over-population infanticide isn't a crime. Rather more like a good deed these days."

"Understand they are going to legalize the killing of unwanted children."

"Should have been done long ago."

"People should be more careful. If they don't want children, they should be more careful."

"If you know you can get rid of them, why be careful?"

A woman fanned herself with her pocketbook and glanced at her companion. "Have another sandwich, dear?"

"No, on a diet you know." The companion sighed. "It's too bad that they abolished capital punishment. Believe me, this d'Larte hussy deserves it."

"But it's so much better the way they do it now, I mean sending the guilty to the wars to fight in the front lines. Might as well get some use out of them."

"True. But why bother killing a husband? Divorcing them is so much easier. Only takes a day and you get half the husband's earnings."

"You should know, dear. You've done it enough."

"Only seven times."

"I thought it was eight?"

"I don't count Rodger. The lout killed himself so he wouldn't have to pay me a settlement. Ah, here comes the judge."

\* \* \* \* \*

The spectators stood lazily as the judge entered, then reseated themselves and buzzed in anticipation.

"Your witness has arrived?" the judge asked.

"Yes, Your Honor," the Prosecutor replied.

"Then call him."

The witness was called and sworn in as the spectators gawked at him eagerly.

"Good looking. Dark. Evil eyes though. Black eyes. I like dark eyes, don't you?"

"Dark blue coat. Lime green sports shirt. Nice combination. Must have a suit made with those colors."

"Nasty look about that fellow. Wouldn't trust him."

"Who is he?"

"Shhhhhhhhhhh!"

Isobel d'Larte stared at the witness in fear.

"Your name, please," the Prosecutor demanded of the witness.

"Andy Kirk."

"You are Mr. d'Larte's nephew?"

"Yep."

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Kirk?"

"Anything, but basically I'm an artist."

"Is that what you are doing at the present time, Mr. Kirk?"

"No. Everybody's an artist today. No room for a good one, a real one."

"Then what do you do, Mr. Kirk?" the Prosecutor asked in exasperation.

"Don't shout. I didn't ask to come here."

"What do you do for a living?" the Prosecutor asked quietly.

"Arnaud--Mr. d'Larte--paid me to follow his wife. To spy on her. He paid very well."

The spectators gasped happily. "Now we'll hear something," someone said in a stage whisper. The judge rapped for silence.

"Why did Mr. d'Larte pay you to follow his wife?"

"He thought she had a lover."

"But you heard Mrs. d'Larte claim that she did not have a lover."

"No, I didn't. How could I? I wasn't here."

Laughter rippled through the crowded room and the judge rapped for silence.

The Prosecutor frowned angrily. "Mrs. d'Larte said under oath that she did not have a lover."

"She lied."

"Can you prove that she lied?"

"I suppose so."

"And they were really lovers?"

"Mrs. d'Larte told me that she loved him."

"And he loved her I suppose."

"Mrs. d'Larte loved him."

"How long were they lovers?"

"Nearly a month."

"I repeat, can you prove it?"

"I can tell you who her lover is."

"Then by all means do so."

"No! Please, no," Isobel d'Larte cried. "I killed my husband."

When order had been restored in the court the judge stared down at Isobel.

"Am I to understand that you confess to the murder of Arnaud d'Larte?"

"Yes," Isobel said softly. "I hated him and I killed him. I killed with the iron statue of Venus. I hit him with it till he died and I hit him with it after he was dead. I killed him."

Andy Kirk smiled.

It only took a short time to bring in a verdict of guilty against Isobel d'Larte. She accepted the verdict silently and without flinching. In like manner she accepted her sentence. She was to be sent to fight in the front lines of the war in Asia.

"I declare this court adjourned," the judge said and banged his gavel down authoritatively.

As Isobel d'Larte was taken from the room she was led passed Andy Kirk. Seeing him, she stopped and stared at him coldly.

"Why did you do this to me?" she asked.

"To help you. If the trial had continued the way it had you would have been judged insane and executed here in the States. In Asia you may have a chance."

"Does it make a difference if I have a chance? No one really cares."

"You may find what you've been looking for over there."

"You think so?"

"I hope so."

"I don't understand you, Andy."

"Sometimes one must do bad to do good."

Isobel stared at him not understanding his words, then the guard led her away. Isobel d'Larte spent the night in jail, and the next morning, along with twenty other prisoners, was taken to the rocket-port to be sent to Asia. At the rocket-port the prisoners were allowed to say their goodbyes to their families without the benefit of guards. Isobel stood alone watching the tearful farewells, then walked slowly into the cafeteria. As she sat alone at the corner table drinking coffee a tall man dressed in an old fashioned top coat and with an old fashioned hat pulled down over his face walked up to the table and sat down opposite her. Isobel looked at the figure happily.

"I knew you would come."

"Why did you confess?"

"I did not want them to know about us. They would have made it all so ugly sounding. They would have made it sound vile ... and it wasn't." Isobel reached out a hand towards the figure and a metal hand closed over hers. "I didn't want them to harm you."

"You did it for me?"

"Yes. I love you."

"I'm a robot. A machine. An unfeeling thing of iron and steel. How can you love me?"

"My husband was the machine. He ate at the same time everyday, dressed at the same time, went to work at the same time. He did the same things, thought the same things everyday of his life."

"But he had emotion."

"Only those he had been taught to feel and those only at the proper times. He was mad when he should be mad and happy when he should be happy, nothing more. He was much more of a machine than you."

"But I cannot return your love. I do not know what emotion is."

"I had to have someone," Isobel cried. "I had to have someone who was kind to me. You liked what I liked. You could talk to me of something besides machines. Machines do everything now. But you could talk to me of art, music, beauty."

"My creator taught me those things. Taught me to care for those things in the museum. I would miss them if they were taken away."

"Yes." Sudden tears stung Isobel's eyes. No one would miss her. No one would care about her.

"I will miss you too, Isobel. I will miss you very much."

"As much as the things in the museum?"

"As much as those. More."

Isobel stood up, leaned over and kissed the metal cheek of the one opposite her. "Then it was worth it."

"All prisoners assemble on the runway," a harsh voice boomed over the loudspeaker.

"Perhaps someday I can learn to return love," the robot said.

"You have done more than that. You have made me happy."

"Come back safely, Isobel."

Isobel d'Larte ran to the runway and joined the other prisoners. They looked at her strangely not understanding her smile. Isobel barely noticed them, for she was happy. Someone cared for her. That was the important thing. \_Someone cared.\_



## TRANSFER POINT

By Anthony Boucher

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from  
*Galaxy Science Fiction November 1950*.  
Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that  
the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

*It was a nasty plot Vyrko was involved in.  
The worst part was that he constructed it  
himself--and didn't get the end right!*

There were three of them in the retreat, three out of all mankind safe from the deadly yellow bands.

The great Kirth-Labbery himself had constructed the retreat and its extraordinary air-conditioning--not because his scientific genius had foreseen the coming of the poisonous element, agnoton, and the end of the human race, but because he itched.

And here Vyrko sat, methodically recording the destruction of mankind, once in a straight factual record, for the instruction of future readers ("if any," he added wryly to himself), and again as a canto in that epic poem of Man which he never expected to complete, but for which he lived.

Lavra's long golden hair fell over his shoulders. It was odd that its scent distracted him when he was at work on the factual record, yet seemed to wing the lines of the epic.

"But why bother?" she asked. Her speech might have been clearer if her tongue had not been more preoccupied with the savor of the apple than with the articulation of words. But Vyrko understood readily: the remark was as familiar an opening as P-K4 in chess.

"It's my duty," Vyrko explained patiently. "I haven't your father's scientific knowledge and perception. Your father's? I haven't the knowledge of his humblest lab assistant. But I can put words together

so that they make sense and sometimes more than sense, and I have to do this."

From Lavra's plump red lips an apple pip fell into the works of the electronic typewriter. Vyrko fished it out automatically; this too was part of the gambit, with the possible variants of grape seed, orange peel....

"But why," Lavra demanded petulantly, "won't Father let us leave here? A girl might as well be in a ... a...."

"\_Convent?\_" Vyrko suggested. He was a good amateur paleolinguist. "There is an analogy--even despite my presence. \_Convents\_ were supposed to shelter girls from the Perils of The World. Now the whole world is one great Peril ... outside of this retreat."

"Go on," Lavra urged. She had long ago learned, Vyrko suspected, that he was a faintly over-serious young man with no small talk, and that she could enjoy his full attention only by asking to have something explained, even if for the \_n\_th time.

\* \* \* \*

He smiled and thought of the girls he used to talk \_with\_, not \_at\_, and of how little breath they had for talking now in the world where no one drew an unobstructed breath.

It had begun with the accidental discovery in a routine laboratory analysis of a new element in the air, an inert gas which the great paleolinguist Larkish had named \_agnoton\_, the Unknown Thing, after the pattern of the similar nicknames given to others: \_neon\_, the New Thing; \_xenon\_, the Strange Thing.

It had continued (the explanation ran off so automatically that his mind was free to range from the next line of the epic to the interesting question of whether the presence of ear lobes would damage the symmetry of Lavra's perfect face) it had continued with the itching and sneezing, the coughing and wheezing, with the increase of the percentage of agnoton in the atmosphere, promptly passing any other inert gas, even argon, and soon rivaling oxygen itself.

And it had culminated (no, the lines were cleaner without lobes), on that day when only the three of them were here in this retreat, with the discovery that the human race was allergic to agnoton.

Allergies had been conquered for a decade of generations. Their cure, even their palliation, had been forgotten. And mankind coughed and sneezed and itched ... and died. For while the allergies of the ancient past produced only agonies to make the patient long for death, agnoton

brought on racking and incessant spasms of coughing and sneezing which no heart could long withstand.

"So if you leave this shelter, my dear," Vyrko concluded, "you too will fight for every breath and twist your body in torment until your heart decides that it is all just too much trouble. Here we are safe, because your father's eczema was the only known case of allergy in centuries--and was traced to the inert gases. Here is the only air-conditioning in the world that excludes the inert gases--and with them agnoton. And here--"

\* \* \* \* \*

Lavra leaned forward, a smile and a red fleck of apple skin on her lips, the apples of her breasts touching Vyrko's shoulders. This too was part of the gambit.

Usually it was merely declined. Tyrsa stood between them. Tyrsa, who sang well and talked better; whose plain face and beautiful throat were alike racked by agnoton.... This time the gambit was interrupted.

Kirth-Labbery himself had come in unnoticed. His old voice was thin with weariness, sharp with impatience. "And here we are, safe in perpetuity, with our air-conditioning, our energy plant, our hydroponics! Safe in perpetual siege, besieged by an inert gas!"

Vyrko grinned. "Undignified, isn't it?"

Kirth-Labbery managed to laugh at himself. "Damn your secretarial hide, Vyrko. I love you like a son, but if I had one man who knew a meson from a metazoon to help me in the laboratory...."

"You'll find something, Father," Lavra said vaguely.

Her father regarded her with an odd seriousness. "Lavra," he said, "your beauty is the greatest thing that I have wrought--with a certain assistance, I'll grant, from the genes so obviously carried by your mother. That beauty alone still has meaning. The sight of you would bring a momentary happiness even to a man choking in his last spasms, while our great web of civilization...."

He absently left the sentence unfinished and switched on the video screen. He had to try a dozen channels before he found one that was still casting. When every erg of a man's energy goes to drawing his next breath, he cannot tend his machine.

At last Kirth-Labbery picked up a Nyork newscast. The announcer was sneezing badly ("The older literature," Vyrko observed, "found sneezing comic...."), but still contriving to speak, and somewhere a group of

technicians must have had partial control of themselves.

"Four hundred and seventy-two planes have crashed," the announcer said, "in the past forty-eight hours. Civil authorities have forbidden further plane travel indefinitely because of the danger of spasms at the controls, and it is rumored that all vehicular transport whatsoever is to come under the same ban. No Rocklipper has arrived from Lunn for over a week, and it is thirty-six hours since we have made contact with the Lunn telestation. Yurp has been silent for over two days, and Asia a week.

"The most serious threat of this epidemic,' the head of the Academy has said in an authorized statement, 'is the complete disruption of the systems of communication upon which world civilization is based. When man becomes physically incapable of governing his machines....'"

\* \* \* \* \*

It was then that they saw the first of the yellow bands.

It was just that: a band of bright yellow some thirty centimeters wide, about five meters long, and so thin as to seem insubstantial, a mere stripe of color. It came underneath the backdrop behind the announcer. It streaked about the casting room with questing sinuosity. No features, no appendages relieved its yellow blankness.

Then with a deft whipping motion it wrapped itself around the announcer. It held him only an instant. His hideously shriveled body plunged toward the camera as the screen went dead.

That was the start of the horror.

Vyrko, naturally, had no idea of the origin of the yellow bands. Even Kirth-Labbery could offer no more than conjectures. From another planet, another system, another galaxy, another universe....

It did not matter. Precise knowledge had now lost its importance. Kirth-Labbery was almost as indifferent to the problem as was Lavra; he speculated on it out of sheer habit. What signified was that the yellow bands were alien, and that they were rapidly and precisely completing the destruction of mankind begun by the agnoton.

"Their arrival immediately after the epidemic," Kirth-Labbery concluded, "cannot be coincidence. You will observe that they function freely in an agnoton-laden atmosphere."

"It would be interesting," Vyrko commented, "to visualize a band sneezing...."

"It's possible," the scientist corrected, "that the agnoton was a poison-gas barrage laid down to soften Earth for their coming; but is it likely that they could \_know\_ that a gas harmless to them would be lethal to other life? It's more probable that they learned from spectroscopic analysis that the atmosphere of Earth lacked an element essential to them, which they supplied before invading."

Vyrko considered the problem while Lavra sliced a peach with delicate grace. She was unable to resist licking the juice from her fingers.

"Then if the agnoton," he ventured, "is something that they imported, is it possible that their supply might run short?"

Kirth-Labbery fiddled with the dials under the screen. It was still possible to pick up occasional glimpses from remote sectors, though by now the heart sickened in advance at the knowledge of the inevitable end of the cast.

"It is possible, Vyrko. It is the only hope. The three of us here, where the agnoton and the yellow bands are alike helpless to enter, may continue our self-sufficient existence long enough to outlast the invaders. Perhaps somewhere on Earth there are other such nuclei, but I doubt it. We are the whole of the future ... and I am old."

\* \* \* \* \*

Vyrko frowned. He resented the terrible weight of a burden that he did not want but could not reject. He felt himself at once, oppressed and ennobled. Lavra went on eating her peach.

The video screen sprang into light. A young man with the tense, lined face of premature age spoke hastily, urgently. "To all of you, if there are any of you.... I have heard no answer for two days now.... It is chance that I am here. But \_watch\_, all of you! I have found how the yellow bands came here. I am going to turn the camera on it now ... \_watch\_!"

The field of vision panned to something that was for a moment totally incomprehensible. "This is their ship," the old young man gasped. It was a set of bars of a metal almost exactly the color of the bands themselves, and it appeared in the first instant like a three-dimensional projection of a tesseract. Then as they looked at it, their eyes seemed to follow strange new angles. Possibilities of vision opened up beyond their capacities. For a moment they seemed to see what the human eye was not framed to grasp.

"They come," the voice panted on, "from...."

The voice and the screen went dead. Vyrko covered his eyes with his

hands. Darkness was infinite relief. A minute passed before he felt that he could endure once more even the normal exercise of the optic nerve. He opened his eyes sharply at a little scream from Lavra.

He opened them to see how still Kirth-Labbery sat. The human heart, too, is framed to endure only so much; and, as the scientist had said, he was old.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was three days after Kirth-Labbery's death before Vyrko had brought his prose-and-verse record up to date. Nothing more had appeared on the video, even after the most patient hours of knob-twirling. Now Vyrko leaned back from the keyboard and contemplated his completed record--and then sat forward with abrupt shock at the thought of that word \_completed\_.

There was nothing more to write.

The situation was not novel in literature. He had read many treatments, and even written a rather successful satire on the theme himself. But here was the truth itself.

He was that most imagination-stirring of all figures, The Last Man on Earth. And he found it a boring situation.

Kirth-Labbery, had he lived, would have devoted his energies in the laboratory to an effort, even conceivably a successful one, to destroy the invaders. Vyrko knew his own limitations too well to attempt that.

Vrist, his gay wild twin, who had been in Lunn on yet another of his fantastic ventures when the agnoton struck--Vrist would have dreamed up some gallant feat of physical prowess to make the invaders pay dearly for his life. Vyrko found it difficult to cast himself in so swash-buckling a role.

He had never envied Vrist till now. \_Be jealous of the dead; only the living are alone.\_ Vyrko smiled as he recalled the line from one of his early poems. It had been only the expression of a pose when he wrote it, a mood for a song that Tyrsa would sing well....

It was in this mood that he found (the ancient word had no modern counterpart) the \_pulps\_.

\* \* \* \* \*

He knew their history: how some eccentric of two thousand years ago (the name was variously rendered as Trees or Tiller) had buried them in a hermetic capsule to check against the future; how Tarabal had

dug them up some fifty years ago; how Kirth-Labbery had spent almost the entire Hartl Prize for them because, as he used to assert, their incredible mixture of exact prophecy and arrant nonsense offered the perfect proof of the greatness and helplessness of human ingenuity.

But Vyrko had never read them before. They would at least be a novelty to deaden the boredom of his classically dramatic situation. He passed a more than pleasant hour with \_Galaxy\_ and \_Surprising\_ and the rest, needing the dictionary but rarely. He was particularly impressed by one story detailing, with the most precise minutiae, the politics of the American Religious Wars--a subject on which he himself had based a not unsuccessful novel. By one Norbert Holt, he observed. Extraordinary how exact a forecast ... and yet extraordinary too how many of the stories dealt with space- and time-travel, which the race had never yet attained and now never would....

And inevitably there was a story, a neat and witty one by an author named Knight, about the Last Man on Earth. He read it and smiled, first at the story and then at his own stupidity.

He found Lavra in the laboratory, of all unexpected places.

She was staring fixedly at one corner, where the light did not strike clearly.

"What's so fascinating?" Vyrko asked.

Lavra turned suddenly. Her hair and her flesh rippled with the perfect grace of the movement. "I was thinking...."

Vyrko's half-formed intent toward her permitted no comment on that improbable statement.

"The day before Father ... died, I was in here with him and I asked if there was any hope of our escaping ever. Only this time he answered me. He said yes, there was a way out, but he was afraid of it. It was an idea he'd worked on but never tried. And we'd be wiser not to try it, he said."

"I don't believe in arguing with your father--even post mortem."

"But I can't help wondering.... And when he said it, he looked over at that corner."

\* \* \* \* \*

Vyrko went to that corner and drew back a curtain. There was a chair of metal rods, and a crude control panel, though it was hard to see what it was intended to control. He dropped the curtain.

For a moment he stood watching Lavra. She was a fool, but she was exceedingly lovely. And the child of Kirth-Labbery could hardly carry only a fool's genes.

Several generations could grow up in this retreat before the inevitable failure of the most permanent mechanical installations made it uninhabitable. By that time Earth would be free of agnoton and yellow bands, or they would be so firmly established that there was no hope. The third generation would go forth into the world, to perish or....

He walked over to Lavra and laid a gentle hand on her golden hair.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vyrko never understood whether Lavra had been bored before that time. A life of undemanding inaction with plenty of food may well have sufficed her. Certainly she was not bored now.

At first she was merely passive; Vyrko had always suspected that she had meant the gambit to be declined. Then as her interest mounted and Vyrko began to compliment himself on his ability as an instructor, they became certain of their success; and from that point on she was rapt with the fascination of the changes in herself.

But even this new development did not totally rid Vyrko of his own ennui. If there were only something he could \_do\_, some positive, Vristian, Kirth-Labberian step that he could take! He damned himself for having been an incompetent aesthetic fool, who had taken so for granted the scientific wonders of his age that he had never learned what made them tick, or how greater wonders might be attained.

He slept too much, he ate too much, for a brief period he drank too much--until he found boredom even less attractive with a hangover.

He tried to write, but the terrible uncertainty of any future audience disheartened him.

Sometimes a week would pass without his consciously thinking of agnoton or the yellow bands. Then he would spend a day flogging himself into a state of nervous tension worthy of his uniquely dramatic situation, but he would always relapse. There just wasn't anything to do.

Now even the consolation of Lavra's beauty was vanishing, and she began demanding odd items of food which the hydroponic garden could not supply.

"If you loved me, you'd find a way to make cheese ..." or "... grow a



new kind of peach ... a little like a grape, only different...."

It was while he was listening to a film wire of Tyrsa's (the last she ever made, in the curious tonalities of that newly rediscovered Mozart opera) and seeing her homely face, made even less lovely by the effort of those effortless-sounding notes, that he became conscious of the operative phrase.

"If you loved me...."

"Have I ever said I did?" he snapped.

He saw a new and not readily understood expression mar the beauty of Lavra's face. "No," she said in sudden surprise. "No," and her voice fell to flatness, "you haven't...."

And as her sobs--the first he had ever heard from her--traveled away toward the hydroponic room, he felt a new and not readily understood emotion. He switched off the film wire midway through the pyrotechnic rage of the eighteenth-century queen of darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vyrko found a curious refuge in the pulps. There was a perverse satisfaction in reading the thrilling exploits of other Last Men on Earth. He could feel through them the emotions that he should be feeling directly. And the other stories were fun, too, in varying ways. For instance, that astonishingly accurate account of the delicate maneuvering which averted what threatened to be the first and final Atomic War....

He noticed one oddity: Every absolutely correct story of the "future" bore the same by-line. Occasionally other writers made good guesses, predicted logical trends, foresaw inevitable extrapolations. But only Norbert Holt named names and dated dates with perfect historical accuracy.

It wasn't possible. It was too precise to be plausible. It was far more spectacular than the erratic Nostradamus often discussed in the pulps.

But there it was. He had read the Holt stories solidly through in order a half-dozen times, without finding a single flaw, when he discovered the copy of Surprising Stories that had slipped behind a shelf and was therefore new to him.

He looked at once at the contents page. Yes, there was a Holt and--he felt a twinge of irrational but poignant sadness--one labeled as posthumous.

This story, we regret to tell you, is incomplete, and not only because of Norbert Holt's tragic death last month. This is the last in chronological order of Holt's stories of a consistently plotted future; but this fragment was written before his masterpiece, The Siege of Lunn. Holt himself used to tell me that he could never finish it, that he could not find an ending; and he died still not knowing how The Last Boredom came out. But here, even though in fragment form, is the last published work of the greatest writer about the future, Norbert Holt.

The note was signed with the initials M. S. Vyrko had long sensed a more than professional intimacy between Holt and his editor, Manning Stern; this obituary introduction must have been a bitter task. But his eyes were hurrying on, almost fearfully, to the first words of The Lost Boredom:

There were three of them in the retreat, three out of all mankind safe from the deadly yellow bands. The great Kirth-Labbery himself had constructed....

Vyrko blinked and started again. It still read the same. He took firm hold of the magazine, as though the miracle might slip between his fingers, and dashed off with more energy than he had felt in months.

\* \* \* \* \*

He found Lavra in the hydroponic room. "I have just found," he shouted, "the damndest unbelievable--"

"Darling," said Lavra, "I want some meat."

"Don't be silly. We haven't any meat. Nobody's eaten meat except at ritual dinners for generations."

"Then I want a ritual dinner."

"You can go on wanting. But look at this! Just read those first lines!"

"Vyrko," she pleaded, "I \_ want \_ it."

"Don't be an idiot!"

Her lips pouted and her eyes moistened. "Vyrko dear.... What you said when you were listening to that funny music.... Don't you love me?"

"No," he barked.

Her eyes overflowed. "You don't love me? Not after...?"

All Vyrko's pent-up boredom and irritation erupted. "You're beautiful, Lavra, or you were a few months ago, but you're an idiot. I am not in the habit of loving idiots."

"But you...."

"I tried to assure the perpetuation of the race--questionable though the desirability of such a project seems at the moment. It was not an unpleasant task, but I'm damned if it gives you the right in perpetuity to pester me."

She moaned a little as he slammed out of the room. He felt oddly better. Adrenalin is a fine thing for the system. He settled into a chair and resolutely read, his eyes bugging like a cover-monster's with amazed disbelief. When he reached the verbatim account of the quarrel he had just enjoyed, he dropped the magazine.

It sounded so petty in print. Such stupid inane bickering in the face of.... He left the magazine lying there and went back to the hydroponic room.

Lavra was crying--noiselessly this time, which somehow made it worse. One hand had automatically plucked a ripe grape, but she was not eating it. He went up behind her and slipped his hand under her long hair and began stroking the nape of her neck. The soundless sobs diminished gradually. When his fingers moved tenderly behind her ears, she turned to him with parted lips. The grape fell from her hand.

"I'm sorry," he heard himself saying. "It's me that's the idiot. Which, I repeat, I am not in the habit of loving. And you're the mother of my twins and I do love you...." And he realized that the statement was quite possibly, if absurdly, true.

"I don't want anything now," Lavra said when words were again in order. She stretched contentedly, and she was still beautiful even in the ungainly distortion which might preserve a race. "Now what were you trying to tell me?"

\* \* \* \* \*

He explained. "And this Holt is always right," he ended. "And now he's writing about us!"

"Oh! Oh, then we'll know--"

"We'll know everything. We'll know what the yellow bands are and what becomes of them and what happens to mankind and--"

"--and we'll know," said Lavra, "whether it's a boy or a girl."

Vyrko smiled. "Twins, I told you. It runs in my family--no less than one pair to a generation. And I think that's it--Holt's already planted the fact of my having a twin named Vrist, even though he doesn't come into the action."

"Twins.... That \_would\_ be nice. They wouldn't be lonely until we could.... But get it quick, dear. Read it to me; I can't wait!"

So he read Norbert Holt's story to her--too excited and too oddly affectionate to point out that her long-standing aversion for print persisted even when she herself was a character. He read on past the quarrel. He read a printable version of the past hour. He read about himself reading the story to her.

"Now!" she cried. "We're up to \_now\_. What happens next?"

Vyrko read:

The emotional release of anger and love had set Vyrko almost at peace with himself again; but a small restlessness still nibbled at his brain.

Irrelevantly he remembered Kirth-Labbery's cryptic hint of escape. Escape for the two of them, happy now; for the two of them and for their ... it had to be, according to the odds, their twins.

He sauntered curiously into the laboratory, Lavra following him. He drew back the curtain and stared at the chair of metal rods. It was hard to see the control board that seemed to control nothing. He sat in the chair for a better look.

He made puzzled grunting noises. Lavra, her curiosity finally stirred by something inedible, reached over his shoulder and poked at the green button.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I don't like that last thing he says about me," Lavra objected. "I don't like anything he says about me. I think your Mr. Holt is a very nasty person."

"He says you're beautiful."

"And he says you love me. Or does he? It's all mixed up."

"It is all mixed up ... and I do love you."

The kiss was a short one; Lavra had to say, "And what next?"

"That's all. It ends there."

"Well.... Aren't you...?"

Vyrko felt strange. Holt had described his feelings so precisely. He was at peace and still curious, and the thought of Kirth-Labbery's escape method did nibble restlessly at his brain.

He rose and sauntered into the laboratory, Lavra following him. He drew back the curtain and stared at the chair of metal rods. It was hard to see the control board that seemed to control nothing. He sat in the chair for a better look.

He made puzzled grunting noises. Lavra, her curiosity finally stirred by something inedible, reached over his shoulder and poked at the green button.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vyrko had no time for amazement when Lavra and the laboratory vanished. He saw the archaic vehicle bearing down directly upon him and tried to get out of the way as rapidly as possible. But the chair hampered him and before he could get to his feet the vehicle struck. There was a red explosion of pain and then a long blackness.

He later recalled a moment of consciousness at the hospital and a shrill female voice repeating over and over, "But he wasn't there and then all of a sudden he was and I hit him. It was like he came out of nowhere. He wasn't there and all of a sudden...." Then the blackness came back.

All the time of his unconsciousness, all through the semi-conscious nightmares while doctors probed at him and his fever soared, his unconscious mind must have been working on the problem. He knew the complete answer the instant that he saw the paper on his breakfast tray, that first day he was capable of truly seeing anything.

The paper was easy to read for a paleolinguist with special training in \_pulp\_ --easier than the curious concept of breakfast was to assimilate. What mattered was the date. 1948--and the headlines refreshed his knowledge of the Cold War and the impending election. (There was something he should remember about that election....)

He saw it clearly. Kirth-Labbery's genius had at last evolved a time machine. That was the one escape, the escape which the scientist had not yet tested and rather distrusted. And Lavra had poked the green button because Norbert Holt had said she had poked (would poke?) the green button.

How many buttons could a wood poke poke if a wood poke would poke....

"The breakfast didn't seem to agree with him, doctor."

"Maybe it was the paper. Makes me run a temperature every morning, too!"

"Oh, doctor, you do say the funniest things!"

"Nothing funnier than this case. Total amnesia, as best we can judge by his lucid moments. And his clothes don't help us--must've been on his way to a fancy-dress party. Or maybe I should say fancy-\_un\_dress!"

"Oh, \_doctor\_!"

"Don't tell me nurses can blush. Never did when I was an intern--and you can't say they didn't get a chance! But this character here ... not a blessed bit of identification on him! Riding some kind of newfangled bike that got smashed up.... Better hold off on the solid food for a bit--stick to intravenous feeding."

\* \* \* \* \*

He'd had this trouble before at ritual dinners, Vyrko finally recalled. Meat was apt to affect him badly--the trouble was that he had not at first recognized those odd strips of oily solid which accompanied the egg as meat.

The adjustment was gradual and successful, in this as in other matters. At the end of two weeks, he was eating meat easily (and, he confessed, with a faintly obscene non-ritual pleasure) and equally easily chatting with nurses and fellow patients about the events (which he still privately tended to regard as mummified museum pieces) of 1948.

His adjustment, in fact, was soon so successful that it could not continue. The doctor made that clear.

"Got to think about the future, you know. Can't keep you here forever. Nasty unreasonable prejudice against keeping well men in hospitals."

Vyrko allowed the expected laugh to come forth. "But since," he said, gladly accepting the explanation that was so much more credible than the truth, "I haven't any idea who I am, where I live, or what my profession is--"

"Can't remember anything? Don't know if you can take shorthand, for instance? Or play the bull fiddle?"

"Not a thing." Vyrko felt it hardly worth while to point out his

one manual accomplishment, the operation of the as-yet-uninvented electronic typewriter.

"Behold," he thought, "the Man of the Future. I've read all the time travel stories. I know what should happen. I teach them everything Kirth-Labbery knew and I'm the greatest man in the world. Only the fictional time travel never happens to a poor dope who took for granted all the science around him, who pushed a button or turned a knob and never gave a damn what happened or why. Here they're just beginning to get two-dimensional black-and-white short-range television. We had (will have?) stereoscopic full-color world-wide video--which I'm about as capable of constructing here as my friend the doctor would be of installing electric light in Ancient Rome. The Mouse of the Future...."

The doctor had been thinking, too. He said, "Notice you're a great reader. Librarian's been telling me about you--went through the whole damn hospital library like a bookworm with a tapeworm!"

Vyrko laughed dutifully. "I like to read," he admitted.

"Ever try writing?" the doctor asked abruptly, almost in the tone in which he might reluctantly advise a girl that her logical future lay in Port Saïd.

This time Vyrko really laughed. "That does seem to ring a bell, you know.... It might be worth trying. But at that, what do I live on until I get started?"

"Hospital trustees here administer a rehabilitation fund. Might wangle a loan. Won't be much, of course; but I always say a single man's got only one mouth to feed--and if he feeds more, he won't be single long!"

"A little," said Vyrko with a glance at the newspaper headlines, "might go a long way."

\* \* \* \*

It did. There was the loan itself, which gave him a bank account on which, in turn, he could acquire other short-term loans--at exorbitant interest. And there was the election.

He had finally reconstructed what he should know about it. There had been a brilliant Wheel-of-If story in one of the much later pulps, on \_If\_ the Republicans had won the 1948 election. Which meant that actually they had lost; and here, in October of 1948, all newspapers, all commentators, and most important, all gamblers, were convinced that they must infallibly win.

On Wednesday, November third, Vyrko repaid his debts and settled

down to his writing career, comfortably guaranteed against immediate starvation.

A half-dozen attempts at standard fiction failed wretchedly. A matter of "tone," editors remarked vaguely, on the rare occasions when they did not confine themselves to the even vaguer phrases of printed rejection forms. A little poetry sold--"if you can call that selling," Vyrko thought bitterly, comparing the financial position of the poet here and in his own world.

His failures were beginning to bring back the bitterness and boredom, and his thoughts turned more and more to that future to which he could never know the answer.

Twins. It had to be twins--of opposite sexes, of course. The only hope of the continuance of the race lay in a matter of odds and genetics.

Odds.... He began to think of the election bet, to figure other angles with which he could turn foreknowledge to profit. But his pulp-reading had filled his mind with fears of the paradoxes involved. He had calculated the election bets carefully; they could not affect the outcome of the election, they could not even, in their proportionately small size, affect the odds. But any further step....

Vyrko was, like most conceited men, fond of self-contempt, which he felt he could occasionally afford to indulge in. Possibly his strongest access of self-contempt came when he realized the simplicity of the solution to all his problems.

He could write for the science fiction pulps.

The one thing that he could handle convincingly and skilfully, with the proper "tone," was the future. Possibly start off with a story on the Religious Wars; he'd done all that research on his novel. Then....

It was not until he was about to mail the manuscript that the full pattern of the truth struck him.

Soberly, yet half-grinning, he crossed out KIRTH VYRKO on the first page and wrote NORBERT HOLT.

\* \* \* \* \*

Manning Stern rejoiced loudly in this fresh discovery. "This boy's got it! He makes it sound so real that...." The business office was instructed to pay the highest bonus rate (unheard of for a first story) and an intensely cordial letter went to the author outlining immediate needs and offering certain story suggestions.



The editor of \_Surprising\_ was no little surprised at the answer:

... I regret to say that all my stories will be based on one consistent scheme of future events and that you must allow me to stick to my own choice of material....

\* \* \* \* \*

"And who the hell," Manning Stern demanded, "is editing this magazine?" and dictated a somewhat peremptory suggestion for a personal interview.

The features were small and sharp, and the face had a sort of dark aliveness. It was a different beauty from Lavra's, and an infinitely different beauty from the curious standards set by the 1949 films; but it was beauty and it spoke to Norbert Holt.

"You'll forgive a certain surprise, Miss Stern," he ventured. "I've read \_Surprising\_ for so many years and never thought...."

Manning Stern grinned. "That the editor was also surprising? I'm used to it--your reaction, I mean. I don't think I'll ever be quite used to being a woman ... or a human being, for that matter."

"Isn't it rather unusual? From what I know of the field...."

"Please God, when I find a man who can write, don't let him go all male-chauvinist on me! I'm a good editor," said she with becoming modesty (and don't you ever forget it!), "and I'm a good scientist. I even worked on the Manhattan Project--until some character discovered that my adopted daughter was a Spanish War orphan. But what we're here to talk about is this consistent-scheme gimmick of yours. It's all right, of course; it's been done before. But where I frankly think you're crazy is in planning to do it \_exclusively\_."

Norbert Holt opened his briefcase. "I've brought along an outline that might help convince you...."

An hour later Manning Stern glanced at her watch and announced, "End of office hours! Care to continue this slugfest over a martini or five? I warn you--the more I'm plied, the less pliant I get."

And an hour after that she stated, "We might get some place if we'd stay some place. I mean the subject seems to be getting elusive."

"The hell," Norbert Holt announced recklessly, "with editorial relations. Let's get back to the current state of the opera."

"It was paintings. I was telling you about the show at the--"

"No, I remember now. It was movies. You were trying to explain the Marx Brothers. Unsuccessfully, I may add."

"Un ... suc ... cess ... fully," said Manning Stern ruminatively. "Five martinis and the man can say unsuccessfully successfully. But I try to explain the Marx Brothers yet! Look, Holt. I've got a subversive orphan at home and she's undoubtedly starving. I've got to feed her. You come home and meet her and have potluck, huh?"

"Good. Fine. Always like to try a new dish."

Manning Stern looked at him curiously. "Now was that a gag or not? You're funny, Holt. You know a lot about everything and then all of a sudden you go all Man-from-Mars on the simplest thing. Or do you...? Anyway, let's go feed Raquel."

And five hours later Holt was saying, "I never thought I'd have this reason for being glad I sold a story. Manning, I haven't had so much fun talking to--I almost said 'to a woman.' I haven't had so much fun talking since--"

He had almost said since the agnoton came. She seemed not to notice his abrupt halt. She simply said "Bless you, Norb. Maybe you aren't a male-chauvinist. Maybe even you're.... Look, go find a subway or a cab or something. If you stay here another minute, I'm either going to kiss you or admit you're right about your stories--and I don't know which is worse editor-author relations."

\* \* \* \* \*

Manning Stern committed the second breach of relations first. The fan mail on Norbert Holt's debut left her no doubt that Surprising would profit by anything he chose to write about.

She'd never seen such a phenomenally rapid rise in author popularity. Or rather you could hardly say rise. Holt hit the top with his first story and stayed there. He socked the fans (Guest of Honor at the Washinvention), the pros (first President of Science Fiction Writers of America), and the general reader (author of the first pulp-bred science fiction book to stay three months on the best seller list).

And never had there been an author who was more pure damned fun to work with. Not that you edited him; you checked his copy for typos and sent it to the printers. (Typos were frequent at first; he said something odd about absurd illogical keyboard arrangement.) But just being with him, talking about this, that and those.... Raquel, just turning sixteen, was quite obviously in love with him--praying that he'd have the decency to stay single till she grew up and "You know, Manningcita,

I \_am\_ Spanish; and the Mediterranean girls...."

But there \_was\_ this occasional feeling of \_oddness\_. Like the potluck and the illogical keyboard and that night at SCWA....

"I've got a story problem," Norbert Holt announced there. "An idea, and I can't lick it. Maybe if I toss it out to the literary lions...."

"Story problem?" Manning said, a little more sharply than she'd intended. "I thought everything was outlined for the next ten years."

"This is different. This is a sort of paradox story, and I can't get out of it. It won't end. Something like this: Suppose a man in the remote year X reads a story that tells him how to work a time machine. So he works the time machine and goes back to the year X minus 2000--let's say, for instance, our time. So in 'now' he writes the story that he's going to read two thousand years later, telling himself how to work the time machine because he knows how to work it because he read the story which he wrote because--"

Manning was starting to say "Hold it!" when Matt Duncan interrupted with, "Good old endless-cycle gimmick. Lot of fun to kick around, but Bob Heinlein did it once and for all in \_By His Bootstraps\_. Damnedest tour de force I ever read; there just aren't any switcheroos left."

"Ouroboros," Joe Henderson contributed.

Norbert Holt looked a vain question at him; they knew that one word per evening was Joe's maximum contribution.

Austin Carter picked it up. "Ouroboros, the worm, that circles the universe with its tail in its mouth. The Asgard Serpent, too. And I think there's something in Mayan literature. All symbols of infinity--no beginning, no ending. Always out by the same door where you went in. See that magnificent novel of Eddison's, \_The Worm Ouroboros\_; the perfect cyclic novel, ending with its recommencement, stopping not because there's a stopping place, but because it's uneconomical to print the whole text over infinitely."

"The Quaker Oats box," said Duncan. "With a Quaker holding a box with a Quaker holding a box with a Quaker holding a...."

It was standard professional shop-talk. It was a fine evening with the boys. But there was a look of infinitely remote sadness in Norbert Holt's eyes.

That was the evening that Manning violated her first rule of editor-author relationships.

\* \* \* \*

They were having martinis in the same bar in which Norbert had, so many years ago, successfully said \_unsuccessfully\_.

"They've been good years," he remarked, apparently to the olive.

There was something wrong with this evening. No bounce. No yumph. "That's a funny tense," Manning confided to her own olive. "Aren't they still good years?"

"I've owed you a serious talk for a long time."

"You don't have to pay the debt. We don't go in much for being serious, do we? Not so dead-earnest-catch-in-the-throat serious."

"Don't we?"

"I've got an awful feeling," Manning admitted, "that you're building up to a proposal, either to me or that olive. And if it's me, I've got an awful feeling I'm going to accept--and Raquel will \_never\_ forgive me."

"You're safe," Norbert said dryly. "That's the serious talk. I want to marry you, darling, and I'm not going to."

"I suppose this is the time you twirl your black mustache and tell me you have a wife and family elsewhere?"

"I hope to God I have!"

"No, it wasn't very funny, was it?" Manning felt very little, aside from wishing she were dead.

"I can't tell you the truth," he went on. "You wouldn't believe it. I've loved two women before; one had talent and a brain, the other had beauty and no brain. I think I loved her. The damnedest curse of Ouroboros is that I'll never quite know. If I could take that tail out of that mouth...."

"Go on," she encouraged a little wildly. "Talk plot-gimmicks. It's easier on me."

"And she is carrying ... will carry ... my child--my children, it must be. My twins...."

"Look, Holt. We came in here editor and author--remember back when? Let's go out that way. Don't go on talking. I'm a big girl, but I can't take ... everything. It's been fun knowing you and all future manuscripts will be gratefully received."

"I knew I couldn't say it. I shouldn't have tried. But there won't be any future manuscripts. I've written every Holt I've ever read."

"Does that make sense?" Manning aimed the remark at the olive, but it was gone. So was the martini.

"Here's the last." He took it out of his breast-pocket, neatly folded. "The one we talked about at SCWA--the one I couldn't end. Maybe you'll understand. I wanted somehow to make it clear before...."

The tone of his voice projected a sense of doom, and Manning forgot everything else. "Is something going to happen to you? Are you going to--Oh, my dear, no! All right, so you, have a wife on every space station in the asteroid belt; but if anything happens to you...."

"I don't know," said Norbert Holt. "I can't remember the exact date of that issue...." He rose abruptly. "I shouldn't have tried a goodbye. See you again, darling--the next time round Ouroboros."

She was still staring at the empty martini glass when she heard the shrill of brakes and the excited up-springing of a crowd outside.

\* \* \* \* \*

She read the posthumous fragment late that night, after her eyes had dried sufficiently to make the operation practicable. And through her sorrow her mind fought to help her, making her think, making her be an editor.

She understood a little and disbelieved what she understood. And underneath she prodded herself, "But it isn't a story. It's too short, too inconclusive. It'll just disappoint the Holt fans--and that's everybody. Much better if I do a straight obit, take up a full page on it...."

She fought hard to keep on thinking, not feeling. She had never before experienced so strongly the I-have-been-here-before sensation. She had been faced with this dilemma once before, once on some other time-spiral, as the boys in SCWA would say. And her decision had been....

"It's sentimentality," she protested. "It isn't editing. This decision's right. I know it. And if I go and get another of these attacks and start to change my mind...."

She laid the posthumous Holt fragment on the coals. It caught fire quickly.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning Raquel greeted her with, "Manningcita, who's Norbert Holt?"

Manning had slept so restfully that she was even tolerant of foolish questions at breakfast. "Who?" she asked.

"Norbert Holt. Somehow the name popped into my mind. Is he perhaps one of your writers?"

"Never heard of him."

Raquel frowned. "I was almost sure.... Can you really remember them all? I'm going to check those bound volumes of \_Surprising\_."

"Any luck with your ... what was it...? Holt?" Manning asked the girl a little later.

"No, Manningcita. I was quite unsuccessful."

... \_unsuccessful\_ .... Now why in Heaven's name, mused Manning Stern, should I be thinking of martinis at breakfast time?

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End of the Project Gutenberg EBook of *Transfer Point*, by Anthony Boucher

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## MICRO-MAN

By Weaver Wright

[Transcriber Note: This etext was produced from *Fantasy Book Vol. 1 number 1* (1947). Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

*The little man dared to venture into the realm of the Gods--but the Gods were cruel!*

The early morning streetcar, swaying and rattling along its tracks, did as much to divert my attention from the book I was reading as the contents of the book itself. I did not like Plato. Comfortable though the seat was, I was as uncomfortable as any collegiate could be whose mind would rather dwell upon tomorrow's football game than the immediate

task in hand--the morning session with Professor Russell and the book on my lap.

My gaze wandered from the book and drifted out the distorted window, then fell to the car-sill as I thought over Plato's conclusions. Something moving on the ledge attracted my attention: it was a scurrying black ant. If I had thought about it, I might have wondered how it came there. But the next moment a more curious object on the sill caught my eye. I bent over.

I couldn't make out what it was at first. A bug, perhaps. Maybe it was too small for a bug. Just a little dancing dust, no doubt.

Then I discerned--and gasped. On the sill, there----it was a man! A man on the streetcar's window sill----a little man! He was so tiny I would never have seen him if it hadn't been for his white attire, which made him visible against the brown grain of the shellacked wood. I watched, amazed as his microscopic figure moved over perhaps half an inch.

He wore a blouse and shorts, it seemed, and sandals. Something might have been hanging at his side, but it was too small for me to make out plainly. His head, I thought was silver-coloured, and I think the headgear had some sort of knobs on it. All this, of course, I didn't catch at the time, because my heart was hammering away excitedly and making my fingers shake as I fumbled for a matchbox in my pocket, I pushed it open and let the matches scatter out. Then, as gently as my excitement would allow, I pushed the tiny man from the ledge into the box; for I had suddenly realized the greatness of this amazing discovery.

The car was barely half-filled and no attention had been directed my way. I slid quickly out of the empty seat and hurriedly alighted at the next stop.

In a daze, I stood where I had alighted waiting for the next No. 10 that would return me home, the matchbox held tightly in my hand. They'd put that box in a museum one day!

[Illustration]

I collect stamps--I've heard about getting rare ones with inverted centers, or some minor deviation that made them immensely valuable. I'd imagined getting one by mistake sometime that would make me rich. But this! They'd billed "King Kong" as "The Eighth Wonder of the World," but that was only imaginary--a film ... a terrifying thought crossed my mind. I pushed open the box hastily: maybe I had been dreaming. But there it was--the unbelievable; the Little Man!

A car was before me, just leaving. Its polished surface had not

reflected through the haze, and the new design made so little noise that I hadn't seen it. I jumped for it, my mind in such a turmoil that the conductor had to ask three times for my fare. Ordinarily, I would have been embarrassed, but a young man with his mind on millions doesn't worry about little things like that. At least, not this young man.

How I acted on the streetcar, or traversed the five blocks from the end of the line, I couldn't say. If I may imagine myself, though, I must have strode along the street like a determined machine. I reached the house and let myself into the basement room. Inside, I pulled the shades together and closed the door, the matchbox still in my hand. No one was at home this time of day, which pleased me particularly, for I wanted to figure out how I was going to present this wonder to the world.

I flung myself down on the bed and opened the matchbox. The little man lay very still on the bottom.

"Little Man!" I cried, and turned him out on the quilt. Maybe he had suffocated in the box. Irrational thought! Small though it might be to me, the little box was as big as all outdoors to him. It was the bumping about he'd endured; I hadn't been very thoughtful of him.

He was reviving now, and raised himself on one arm. I pushed myself off the bed, and stepped quickly to my table to procure something with which I could control him. Not that he could get away, but he was so tiny I thought I might lose sight of him.

Pen, pencil, paper, stamps, scissors, clips--none of them were what I wanted. I had nothing definite in mind, but then remembered my stamp outfit and rushed to secure it. Evidently college work had cramped my style along the collecting line, for the tweezers and magnifier appeared with a mild coating of dust. But they were what I needed, and I blew on them and returned to the bed.

The little man had made his way half an inch or so from his former prison; was crawling over what I suppose were, to him, great uneven blocks of red and green and black moss.

He crossed from a red into a black patch as I watched his movements through the glass, and I could see him more plainly against the darker background. He stopped and picked at the substance of his strange surroundings, then straightened to examine a tuft of the cloth. The magnifier enlarged him to a seeming half inch or so, and I could see better, now, this strange tiny creature.

It was a metal cap he wore, and it did have protruding knobs--two of them--slanting at 45 degree angles from his temples like horns. I wondered at their use, but it was impossible for me to imagine. Perhaps they covered some actual growth; he might have had real horns for all I



knew. Nothing would have been too strange to expect.

His clothing showed up as a simple, white, one piece garment, like a shirt and gym shorts. The shorts ended at the knee, and from there down he was bare except for a covering on his feet which appeared more like gloves than shoes. Whatever he wore to protect his feet, it allowed free movement of his toes.

It struck me that this little man's native habitat must have been very warm. His attire suggested this. For a moment I considered plugging in my small heater; my room certainly had no tropical or sub-tropical temperature at that time of the morning--and how was I to know whether he shivered when he felt chill. Maybe he blew his horns. Anyway, I figured a living Eighth Wonder would be more valuable than a dead one; and I didn't think he could be stuffed. But somehow I forgot it in my interest in examining this unusual personage.

The little man had dropped the cloth now, and was staring in my direction. Of course, "my direction" was very general to him; but he seemed to be conscious of me. He certainly impressed me as being awfully different, but what his reactions were, I didn't know.

But someone else knew.

\* \* \* \* \*

In a world deep down in Smallness, in an electron of a dead cell of a piece of wood, five scientists were grouped before a complicated instrument with a horn like the early radios. Two sat and three stood, but their attention upon the apparatus was unanimous. From small hollowed cups worn on their fingers like rings, came a smoke from burning incense. These cups they held to their noses frequently, and their eyes shone as they inhaled. The scientists of infra-smallness were smoking!

With the exception of a recent prolonged silence, which was causing them great anxiety, sounds had been issuing from the instrument for days. There had been breaks before, but this silence had been long-enduring.

Now the voice was speaking again; a voice that was a telepathic communication made audible. The scientists brightened.

"There is much that I cannot understand," it said. The words were hesitant, filled with awe. "I seem to have been in many worlds. At the completion of my experiment, I stood on a land which was brown and black and very rough of surface. With startling suddenness, I was propelled across this harsh country, and, terrifyingly, I was falling. I must have dropped seventy-five feet, but the strange buoyant atmosphere of this strange world saved me from harm.

"My new surroundings were grey and gloomy, and the earth trembled as a giant cloud passed over the sky. I do not know what it meant, but with the suddenness characteristic of this place, it became very dark, and an inexplicable violence shook me into insensibility.

"I am conscious, now, of some giant form before me, but it is so colossal that my eyes cannot focus it. And it changes. Now I seem confronted by great orange mountains with curving ledges cut into their sides. Atop them are great, greyish slabs of protecting opaque rock--a covering like that above our Temples of Aerat--'on which the rain may never fall.' I wish that you might communicate with me, good men of my world. How go the Gods?

"But now! These mountains are lifting, vanishing from my sight. A great \_thing\_ which I cannot comprehend hovers before me. It has many colors, but mostly there is the orange of the mountains. It hangs in the air, and from the portion nearest me grow dark trees as round as myself and as tall. There is a great redness above, that opens like the Katus flower, exposing the ivory white from which puffs the Tongue of Death. Beyond this I cannot see well, but ever so high are two gigantic caverns from which the Winds of the Legends blow--and suck. As dangerous as the Katus, by Dal! Alternately they crush me to the ground, then threaten to tear me from it and hurl me away."

\_My nose was the cavern from which issued the horrifying wind. I noticed that my breath distressed the little man as I leaned over to stare at him, so drew back.\_

\_Upstairs, the visor buzzed. Before answering, so that I would not lose the little man, I very gingerly pinched his shirt with the tongs, and lifted him to the table.\_

"My breath! I am shot into the heavens like Milo and his rocket! I traverse a frightful distance! Everything changes constantly. A million miles below is chaos. This world is mad! A giant landscape passes beneath me, so weird I cannot describe it. I--I cannot understand. Only my heart trembles within me. Neither Science nor the gods can help or comfort in this awful world of Greatness!

"We stop. I hang motionless in the air. The ground beneath is utterly insane. But I see vast uncovered veins of rare metal--and crystal, precious crystal, enough to cover the mightiest Temple we could build! Oh, that Mortia were so blessed! In all this terrifying world, the richness of the crystal and the marvelous metal do redeem.

"Men!----I see ... I believe it is a temple! It is incredibly tall, of black foundation and red spire, but it is weathered, leaning as if to fall--and very bare. The people cannot love their Gods as we--or else

there is the Hunger.... But the gods may enlighten this world, too, and if lowered, I will make for it. A sacred Temple should be a haven--friends! I descend."

\_The little man's eye had caught my scissors and a glass ruler as I suspended him above my desk. They were his exposed vein of metal and the precious crystal. I was searching for something to secure him. In the last second before I lowered him, his heart swelled at the sight of the "Temple"--my red and black pen slanting upward from the desk holder.\_

\_A stamp lying on my desk was an inspiration. I licked it, turned it gum side up, and cautiously pressed the little man against it feet first. With the thought, "That ought to hold him," I dashed upstairs to answer the call.\_

\_But it didn't hold him. There was quite a bit of strength in that tiny body.\_

"Miserable fate! I flounder in a horrid marsh," the upset thought-waves came to the men of Mortia. "The viscous mire seeks to entrap me, but I think I can escape it. Then I will make for the Temple. The Gods may recognize and protect me there."

\* \* \* \* \*

I missed the call--I had delayed too long--but the momentary diversion had cleared my mind and allowed new thoughts to enter. I now knew what my first step would be in presenting the little man to the world.

I'd write a newspaper account myself--exclusive! Give the scoop to Earl. Would that be a sensation for \_his\_ paper! Then I'd be made. A friend of the family, this prominent publisher had often promised he would give me a break when I was ready. Well, I \_was\_ ready!

Excited, dashing downstairs, I half-formulated the idea. The headlines--the little man under a microscope--a world afire to see him. Fame ... pictures ... speeches ... movies ... money.... But here I was at my desk, and I grabbed for a piece of typing paper. They'd put that in a museum, too!

The stamp and the little man lay just at the edge of the sheet, and he clutched at a "great orange mountain" covered by a "vast slab of curving, opaque glass" like the "Temples of Aerat." It was my thumb, but I did not see him there.

\_I thrust the paper into the typewriter and twirled it through.\_

"I have fallen from the mountain, and hang perpendicularly, perilously, on a limitless white plain. I tremble, on the verge of falling, but the

slime from the marsh holds me fast."

\_I struck the first key.\_

"A metal meteor is roaring down upon me. Or is it something I have never before witnessed? It has a tail that streams off beyond sight. It comes at terrific speed.

"I know. The Gods are angry with me for leaving Mortia land. Yes! 'Tis only They who kill by iron. Their hands clutch the rod in mighty tower Baviat, and thrust it here to stamp me out."

And a shaking little figure cried: "Baviat tertia!... Mortia mea...." as the Gods struck wrathfully at a small one daring to explore their domain. For little man Jeko had contrived to see Infinity--and Infinity was only for the eyes of the Immortals, and those of the Experience who dwelt there by the Gods' grace. He had intruded into the realm of the rulers, the world of the After Life and the Gods Omnipotent!

A mortal--in the land of All!

In a world deep down in Smallness, in an electron of a cell of dead wood, five scientists were grouped before the complicated instrument so reminiscent of early radios. But now they all were standing. Strained, perspiring, frightened, they trembled, aghast at the dimensions the experiment had assumed; they were paralysed with terror and awe as they heard of the wrath of the affronted Gods. And the spirit of science froze within them, and would die in Mortia land. "Seek the skies only by hallowed Death" was what they knew. And they destroyed the machine of the man who had found Venquil land--and thought to live--and fled as Jeko's last thoughts came through.

For many years five frightened little men of an electron world would live in deadly fear for their lives, and for their souls after death; and would pray, and become great disciples, spreading the gospels of the Gods. True, Jeko had described a monstrous world; but how could a mere mortal experience its true meaning? It was really ethereal and beautiful, was Venquil land, and they would spend the rest of their days insuring themselves for the day of the experience--when they would assume their comforted place in the world of the After Life.

\_As I struck the first letter, a strange sensation swept over me. Something compelled me to stop and look at the typing paper. I was using a black ribbon, but when the key fell away, there was a tiny spot of red....\_  
\_

## I'M THROUGH!

BY Foo E Onya

The editor of this magazine, under the impression that I am still one of that queer tribe known as science-fiction fans, has asked me to write an article. I am no longer a science-fiction fan. I'M THROUGH! However, I have decided to do the article and explain with my chin leading just why I am through. Here goes.

As to science-fiction; the trouble with me, I think, is that I have outgrown the stuff mentally--and that's not a boast, seeing the type of minds modern science-fiction is dished up for. I'll admit there are a few exceptions, but on the whole, s.f. fans are as arrogant, self-satisfied, conspicuously blind, and critically moronic a group as the good Lord has allowed to people the Earth. I don't blush that I was once a s.f. fan, starting back in '26--I merely thank my personal gods that somewhere along the route I woke up and began to see s.f. as it really is. The superiority complex found in group known as science fiction fans is probably unequalled anywhere. Their certitude in their superiority, as readers of s.f., over all other fiction, is representative of an absolutely incredibly stupid complacency. Facing the business squarely, we can see why s.f. lays CLAIM to such superiority: for no other obvious reason than that such fiction is the bastard child of science and the romantic temperament. But NOT, good lord, because it is INSTRUCTIVE! This has too long been preached, until s.f. readers actually believe it! The amazing naivette of these readers who think their literature is superior merely because they think it teaches--this simple moves me to despair. The fact is, any literature whose function it is to teach, ceases to be literature as such; it becomes didactic literature, which is the color of another horse. When literature becomes obsessed by ideas as such, it is no longer literature. Just how the delusion could have arisen that writing, because invested with scientific symbols, automatically became possessed of new and more precious values, is beyond me to explain. Ideas are out of place in literature unless they are subordinate to the spirit of the story--but s.f. readers have never perceived this. "Give us SCIENCE!" they shriek, running with clenched fists uprisen to the stars. "We want SCIENCE! Give us the Great God!" Well, they are given science, and what does it turn out to be? For the most part the off-scourings of the lunatic fringe. Talk about scientists being inspired by s.f. stories--WHEW! Why, not one s.f. writer in fifty has the remotest idea of what he is talking about--he just picks up some elementary idea and kicks hell out of it. I'll wager that no scientist is going to produce

very spectacularly on the basis of any ideas provided by s.f. It's possible, but wholly improbable. Scientists don't tick that way.

Another amusing fallacy: this well-known business of Wells and Verne doing some predicting. It's one of the biggest laffs of all. They made a flock of predictions, a few of which were realized, and some only in ways most vaguely related to the original conception. How many ideas did they have that never have been realized and never will? Give them credit for being good and often logical guessers, perhaps--but don't claim that as a merit for their WRITING! And how many other good guessers must there have been who never got around to setting down their predictions in print?

There is but one affectation about Wells' "scientific" stories which he published before he discovered his capability at characterization, and this is the affectation of imagination. There is no genuine imagination in beating out cleverness of the s.f. type; the point of view, the inventive quality necessary for their construction, is the same as with the widely circulated tales of Nick Carter. Science-fiction stories are not struck forth with a creative hand, they are manufactured products put together piece-meal--none of them being written in any but the calmest and most conscious mood. They are lacking in that important element of all really GREAT works of the imagination: inspiration. And what is inspiration? It is essentially the soaring of one's soul without the knowledge of the mind. In the gleaming moment the mind becomes the slave of the spirit. Read Wells' EXPERIMENT IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY and see why and what he thinks of his early writings of s.f. He admits that they were only a means to an end, a preparation for his more serious writing that was to come later--Plato's REPUBLIC and More's UTOPIA also serving largely to hasten Wells' Utopian proclivities. When he really began to take his predictions seriously, he began to turn out the important stuff which now bores the average s.f. enthusiast silly--or should I say sillier!

As for Verne, his stuff has never been literature except for boys. It is innocuous adventure--stuff that will not pervert morals. It is not too badly written, and the language is so simple that Verne is readily to be read in the original French, in fact some of his stuff serves as textbooks in French classes in American schools.

But in the main, what I am speaking about now is s.f. as it is constituted today. All of this modern s.f. is worthless except in perhaps one minor respect, and I'm not even sure of that. It CAN open the minds of boys and girls reaching puberty, giving them a more catholic attitude toward startling new ideas. However, it is so very often fatal at the same time, in that these boys and girls become obsessed with it--it enmeshes them until, as I said, they become incredibly blind to all else, so certain are they of the superiority of their hobby over all other fiction. There are exceptions, but my

experience has proven that the exceptions are by far a minority.

Also I will admit that s.f. can on occasion provide escapist flights of imagination--in fact, it can be admirable for this; but this type of s.f. has become exceedingly rare because this crazy superstructure of SCIENCE, and even more so ADVENTURE, has become such a fetish that sound writing concerning people is rarely to be found. In pulp science-fiction, never.

And the frightful smugness fostered by the modern s.f. magazines is simply appalling. It seems that not only the readers, but the editors and writers as well, cannot or will not see anything beyond their own perverted models. Just as one example which I remember very well, look how BRAVE NEW WORLD, the admirable and really important novel by Huxley, was received a few years ago. It was Clark Ashton Smith, I believe, who mentioned it as embodying some of Huxley's "habitual pornography"--simply, stunning P. Schyler Miller; whom, I might mention, I consider as one of the most intellectual authors and fans. And, reviewing the book, C.A. Brandt also decried its preoccupation with sex, but said complacently that it might, at least, bring to the attention of people that there was such a thing as the science-fictionists and their so-called literature. Of all the damned nonsense! BRAVE NEW WORLD was, as a matter of fact, a satire on sex, and of FAR MORE IMPORTANCE than to "bring to the attention of people that there is such a thing as sci-fiction." Huxley conceived a future world in which Ford's mechanistic contributions had become so emphatic as to deprive the people of all but an animal interest in sex; he projects a more normal man into such a civilization for no other reason than to characterize present-day tendencies with searing satire. But Brandt--he evidently would demolish this to set up in its stead a "Space-wrecked On Mars" atrocity.

To get back to the subject, it is my honest opinion that no person of very conspicuous intelligence can subsist very considerably on s.f. after he begins to mature intellectually. There is simply not enuf \_to\_ it to provide intellectual or spiritual nourishment. He may string along with it for a few years out of habit or some mental quirk--but stuff aimed at juvenile minds cannot very long sustain a person of mature years, unless that person is himself a mental adolescent. The way the fans flocked to the S.F. League, indulged in "tests" to prove their "superiority" over other readers, the silly letters in the mags, the petty internal strife, and many other things, have served to widen the gulf between me and s.f.

The most important thing, however, is that I have discovered that there's been too much else of importance, REAL importance, that has been said and written in this world (and is being and will be), for me to desire to give much attention to such a petty thing as s.f. any more. I shall read on the fringe of it, but increasingly less frequently I'm

afraid.

I might have summed this entire thing up by saying, "I'm satiated," but that wouldn't be the entire truth. The entire truth would be: "I am satiated and much wiser." In conclusion let me point out that this is only one man's opinion. I have intentionally been harsh in my estimates, maybe some points are in need of qualification or elucidation, but by and large, I stand back of what I have written here. AMEN.

\* \* \* \* \*

THE ABOVE ARTICLE IS SUBJECT TO CRITICISM--THEREFORE ANY AND ALL FANS AND AUTHORS WHO DISAGREE WILL FIND THEIR ARTICLES AGAINST THIS ONE BY A FAMOUS AUTHOR WELCOMED AND PRINTED IN THE WINTER EDITION OF FUFA!. THE WINTER EDITION WILL BE OUT DURING THE MONTH OF DECEMBER--SO CONTRIBUTIONS SHOULD BE MAILED IMMEDIATELY TO FUTURIA FANTASIA--3054-1/2 West 12th Street, Los Angeles. (EDITOR)

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## THE DOOR INTO INFINITY

By Edmond Hamilton

[Transcriber Note: This etext was produced from *Weird Tales August-September 1936*. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

*An amazing weird mystery story, packed with thrills, danger and startling events.*

### \_1. The Brotherhood of the Door\_

"Where leads the Door?"

"\_It leads outside our world.\_"

"Who taught our forefathers to open the Door?"

"\_They Beyond the Door taught them.\_"

"To whom do we bring these sacrifices?"

"\_We bring them to Those Beyond the Door.\_"



"Shall the Door be opened that They may take them?"

"\_Let the Door be opened!\_"

Paul Ennis had listened thus far, his haggard face uncomprehending in expression, but now he interrupted the speaker.

"But what does it all mean, inspector? Why are you repeating this to me?"

"Did you ever hear anyone speak words like that?" asked Inspector Pierce Campbell, leaning tautly forward for the answer.

"Of course not--it just sounds like gibberish to me," Ennis exclaimed. "What connection can it have with my wife?"

He had risen to his feet, a tall, blond young American whose good-looking face was drawn and worn by inward agony, whose crisp yellow hair was brushed back from his forehead in disorder, and whose blue eyes were haunted with an anguished dread.

He kicked back his chair and strode across the gloomy little office, whose single window looked out on the thickening, foggy twilight of London. He bent across the dingy desk, gripping its edges with his hands as he spoke tensely to the man sitting behind it.

"Why are we wasting time talking here?" Ennis cried. "Sitting here talking, when anything may be happening to Ruth!"

"It's been hours since she was kidnapped. They may have taken her anywhere, even outside of London by now. And instead of searching for her, you sit here and talk gibberish about Doors!"

Inspector Campbell seemed unmoved by Ennis' passion. A bulky, almost bald man, he looked up with his colorless, sagging face, in which his eyes gleamed like two crumbs of bright brown glass.

"You're not helping me much by giving way to your emotions, Mr. Ennis," he said in his flat voice.

"Give way? Who wouldn't give way?" cried Ennis. "Don't you understand, man, it's Ruth that's gone--my wife! Why, we were married only last week in New York. And on our second day here in London, I see her whisked into a limousine and carried away before my eyes! I thought you men at Scotland Yard here would surely act, do something. Instead you talk crazy gibberish to me!"

"Those words are \_not\_ gibberish," said Pierce Campbell quietly. "And I think they're related to the abduction of your wife."

"What do you mean? How could they be related?"

The inspector's bright little brown eyes held Ennis'. "Did you ever hear of an organization called the Brotherhood of the Door?"

Ennis shook his head, and Campbell continued, "Well, I am certain your wife was kidnapped by members of the Brotherhood."

"What kind of an organization is it?" the young American demanded. "A band of criminals?"

"No, it is no ordinary criminal organization," the detective said. His sagging face set strangely. "Unless I am mistaken, the Brotherhood of the Door is the most unholy and blackly evil organization that has ever existed on this earth. Almost nothing is known of it outside its circle. I myself in twenty years have learned little except its existence and name. That ritual I just repeated to you, I heard from the lips of a dying member of the Brotherhood, who repeated the words in his delirium."

Campbell leaned forward. "But I know that every year about this time the Brotherhood come from all over the world and gather at some secret center here in England. And every year, before that gathering, scores of people are kidnapped and never heard of again. I believe that all those people are kidnapped by this mysterious Brotherhood."

"But what becomes of the people they kidnap?" cried the pale young American. "What do they do with them?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Inspector Campbell's bright brown eyes showed a hint of hooded horror, yet he shook his head. "I know no more than you. But whatever they do to the victims, they are never heard of again."

"But you must know something more!" Ennis protested. "What is this Door?"

Campbell again shook his head. "That too I don't know, but whatever it is, the Door is utterly sacred to the members of the Brotherhood, and whomever they mean by They Beyond the Door, they dread and venerate to the utmost."

"Where leads the Door? \_It leads outside our world\_" repeated Ennis. "What can that mean?"

"It might have a symbolic meaning, referring to some secluded fastness of the order which is away from the rest of the world," the inspector

said. "Or it might----"

He stopped. "Or it might what?" pressed Ennis, his pale face thrust forward.

"It might mean, literally, that the Door leads outside our world and universe," finished the inspector.

Ennis' haunted eyes stared. "You mean that this Door might somehow lead into another universe? But that's impossible!"

"Perhaps unlikely," Campbell said quietly, "but not impossible. Modern science has taught us that there are other universes than the one we live in, universes congruent and coincident with our own in space and time, yet separated from our own by the impassable barrier of totally different dimensions. It is not entirely impossible that a greater science than ours might find a way to pierce that barrier between our universe and one of those outside ones, that a Door should be opened from ours into one of those others in the infinite outside."

"A door into the infinite outside," repeated Ennis broodingly, looking past the inspector. Then he made a sudden movement of wild impatience, the dread leaping back strong in his eyes again.

"Oh, what good is all this talk about Doors and infinite universes doing in finding Ruth? I want to do something! If you think this mysterious Brotherhood has taken her, you must surely have some idea of how we can get her back from them? You must know something more about them than you've told."

"I don't know anything more certainly, but I've certain suspicions that amount to convictions," Inspector Campbell said. "I've been working on this Brotherhood for many years, and block after block I've narrowed down to the place I think the order's local center, the London headquarters of the Brotherhood of the Door."

"Where is the place?" asked Ennis tensely.

"It is the waterfront café of one Chandra Dass, a Hindoo, down by East India Docks," said the detective officer. "I've been there in disguise more than once, watching the place. This Chandra Dass I've found to be immensely feared by everyone in the quarter, which strengthens my belief that he's one of the high officers of the Brotherhood. He's too exceptional a man to be really running such a place."

"Then if the Brotherhood took Ruth, she may be at that place now!" cried the young American, electrified.

Campbell nodded his bald head. "She may very likely be. Tonight I'm

going there again in disguise, and have men ready to raid the place. If Chandra Dass has your wife there, we'll get her before he can get her away. Whatever way it turns out, we'll let you know at once."

"Like hell you will!" exploded the pale young Ennis. "Do you think I'm going to twiddle my thumbs while you're down there? I'm going with you. And if you refuse to let me, by heaven I'll go there myself!"

Inspector Pierce Campbell gave the haggard, fiercely determined face of the young man a long look, and then his own colorless countenance seemed to soften a little.

"All right," he said quietly. "I can disguise you so you'll not be recognized. But you'll have to follow my orders exactly, or death will result for both of us."

That strange, hooded dread flickered again in his eyes, as though he saw through shrouding mists the outline of dim horror.

"It may be," he added slowly, "that something worse even than death awaits those who try to oppose the Brotherhood of the Door--something that would explain the unearthly, superhuman dread that enwraps the secret mysteries of the order. We're taking more than our lives in our hands, I think, in trying to unveil those mysteries, to regain your wife. But we've got to act quickly, at all costs. We've got to find her before the great gathering of the Brotherhood takes place, or we'll never find her."

\* \* \* \* \*

Two hours before midnight found Campbell and Ennis passing along a cobble-paved waterfront street north of the great East India Docks. Big warehouses towered black and silent in the darkness on one side, and on the other were old, rotting docks beyond which Ennis glimpsed the black water and gliding lights of the river.

As they straggled beneath the infrequent lights of the ill-lit street, they were utterly changed in appearance. Inspector Campbell, dressed in a shabby suit and rusty bowler, his dirty white shirt innocent of tie, had acquired a new face, a bright red, oily, eager one, and a high, squeaky voice. Ennis wore a rough blue seaman's jacket and a vizored cap pulled down over his head. His unshaven-looking face and subtly altered features made him seem a half-intoxicated seaman off his ship, as he stumbled unsteadily along. Campbell clung to him in true land-shark fashion, plucking his arm and talking wheedlingly to him.

They came into a more populous section of the evil old waterfront street, and passed fried-fish shops giving off the strong smell of hot fat, and the dirty, lighted windows of a half-dozen waterfront saloons,

loud with sordid argument or merriment.

Campbell led past them until they reached one built upon an abandoned, moldering pier, a ramshackle frame structure extending some distance back out on the pier. Its window was curtained, but dull red light glowed through the glass window of the door.

A few shabby men were lounging in front of the place but Campbell paid them no attention, tugging Ennis inside by the arm.

"Carm on in!" he wheedled shrilly. "The night ain't 'alf over yet--we'll 'ave just one more."

"Don't want any more," muttered Ennis drunkenly, swaying on his feet inside. "Get away, you damned old shark."

Yet he suffered himself to be led by Campbell to a table, where he slumped heavily into a chair. His stare swung vacantly.

The café of Chandra Dass was a red-lit, smoke-filled cave with cheap black curtains on the walls and windows, and other curtains cutting off the back part of the building from view. The dim room was jammed with tables crowded with patrons whose babel of tongues made an unceasing din, to which a three-string guitar somewhere added a wailing undertone. The waiters were dark-skinned and tiger-footed Malays, while the patrons seemed drawn from every nation east and west.

Ennis' glazed eyes saw dandified Chinese from Limehouse and Pennyfields, dark little Levantins from Soho, rough-looking Cockneys in shabby caps, a few crazily laughing blacks. From sly white faces, taut brown ones and impassive yellow ones came a dozen different languages. The air was thick with queer food-smells and the acrid smoke.

Campbell had selected a table near the back curtain, and now stridently ordered one of the Malay waiters to bring gin. He leaned forward with an oily smile to the drunken-looking Ennis, and spoke to him in a wheedling undertone.

"Don't look for a minute, but that's Chandra Dass over in the corner, and he's watching us," he said.

Ennis shook his clutching hand away. "Damned old shark!" he muttered again.

He turned his swaying head slowly, letting his eyes rest a moment on the man in the corner. That man was looking straight at him.

Chandra Dass was tall, dressed in spotless white from his shoes to the turban on his head. The white made his dark, impassive, aquiline face

stand out in chiseled relief. His eyes were coal-black, large, coldly searching, as they met Ennis' bleared gaze.

Ennis felt a strange chill as he met those eyes. There was something alien and unhuman, something uncannily disturbing, behind the Hindoo's stare. He turned his gaze vacantly from Chandra Dass to the black curtains at the rear, and then back to his companion.

The silent Malay waiter had brought the liquor, and Campbell pressed a glass toward his companion. "'Ere, matey, take this."

"Don't want it," muttered Ennis, pushing it away. Still in the same mutter, he added, "If Ruth's here, she's somewhere in the back there. I'm going back and find out."

"Don't try it that way, for God's sake!" said Campbell in the wheedling undertone. "Chandra Dass is still watching, and those Malays would be on you in a minute. Wait until I give the word.

"All right, then," Campbell added in a louder, injured tone. "If you don't want it, I'll drink it myself."

He tossed off the glass of gin and set the glass down on the table, looking at his drunken companion with righteous indignation.

"Think I'm tryin' to bilk yer, eh?" he added. "That's a fine way to treat a pal!"

He added in the coaxing lower tone, "All right, I'm going to try it. Be ready to move when I light my cigarette."

He fished a soiled package of Gold Flakes from his pocket and put one in his mouth. Ennis waited, every muscle taut.

The inspector, his red, oily face still injured in expression, struck a match to his cigarette. Almost at once there was a loud oath from one of the shabby loungers outside the front of the building, and the sound of angry voices and blows.

The patrons of Chandra Dass looked toward the door, and one of the Malay waiters went hastily out to quiet the fight. But it grew swiftly, sounded in a moment like a small riot. \_Crash\_--someone was pushed through the front window. The excited patrons pressed toward the front. Chandra Dass pushed through them, issuing quick orders to his servants.

For the time being the back of the café was deserted and unnoticed. Campbell sprang to his feet, and with Ennis close behind him, darted through the black curtains. They found themselves in a black corridor at the end of which a red bulb burned dimly. They could still hear the

uproar.

Campbell's gun was in his hand, and the American's in his.

"We dare only stay here a few moments," the inspector cried. "Look in those rooms along the corridor here."

Ennis frantically tore open a door and peered into a dark room smelling of drugs. "Ruth!" he cried softly. "Ruth!"

## 2. Death Trap

There was no answer. The light in the corridor behind him suddenly went out, plunging him into pitch-black darkness. He jumped back into the dark corridor, and as he did so, heard a sudden scuffle further along it.

"Campbell!" he exclaimed, lunging forward in the black passageway. There was no answer.

He pitched forward through stygian obscurity, his hands searching ahead of him for the inspector. In the dark something whipped smoothly around his throat, tightened there like a slender, contracting tentacle.

Ennis tore frenziedly at the thing, which he felt to be a slender silken cord, but he could not loosen it. It was choking him. He tried to cry out again to Campbell, but his throat could not emit the sounds. He thrashed, twisted helplessly, hearing a loud roaring in his ears, consciousness receding. Then, dimly as though in a dream, Ennis was aware of being lowered to the floor, of being half carried and half dragged along. The constriction around his throat was gone and rapidly his brain began to clear. He opened his eyes.

He found himself lying on the floor of a room illuminated by a great hanging brass lamp of ornate design. The walls of the room were hung with rich, grotesquely worked red silk Indian draperies. His hands and feet were bound behind him, and beside him, tied in the same manner, lay Inspector Campbell. Over them stood Chandra Dass and two of the Malay servants. The faces of the servants were tigerish in their menace, but Chandra Dass' face was one of dark, impassive scorn.

"So you misguided fools thought you could deceive me so easily as that?" he said in a strong, vibrant voice. "Why, we knew hours ago that you, Inspector Campbell, and you, Mr. Ennis, were coming here tonight. We let you get this far only because it was evident that somehow you had

learned too much about us, and that it would be best to let you come here and meet your deaths."

"Chandra Dass, I've men outside," rasped Campbell. "If we don't come out, they'll come in after us."

The Hindoo's proud, dark face did not change its scorn. "They will not come in for a little while, inspector. By that time you two will be dead and we shall be gone with our captives. Yes, Mr. Ennis, your wife is one of those captives," he added to the prostrate young American. "It is too bad we cannot take you and the inspector to share her glorious destiny, but then our accommodations of transport are limited."

"Ruth here?" Ennis' face flamed at the words, and he raised himself a little from the floor on his elbows.

"Then you'll let her go if I pay you? I'll raise any amount, I'll do anything you ask, if you'll set her free."

"No amount of money in the world could buy her from the Brotherhood of the Door," answered Chandra Dass steadily. "For she belongs now, not to us, but to They Beyond the Door. Within a few hours she and many others shall stand before the Door, and They Beyond the Door shall take them."

"What are you going to do to her?" cried Ennis. "What is this damned Door and who are They Beyond it?"

"I do not think that even if I told you, your little mind would be able to accept the mighty truth," Chandra Dass said calmly. His coal-black eyes suddenly flashed with fanatic, frenetic light. "How could your poor, earth-bound little intelligences conceive the true nature of the Door and of those who dwell beyond it? Your puny brains would be stricken senseless by mere apprehension of them, They who are mighty and crafty and dreadful beyond anything on earth."

A cold wind from the alien unknown seemed to sweep the lamplit room with the Hindoo's passionate words. Then that rapt, fanatic exaltation dropped from him as suddenly as it had come, and he spoke in his ordinary vibrant tones.

"But enough of this parley with blind worms of the dust. Bring the weights!"

The last words were addressed to the Malay servants, who sprang to a closet in the corner of the room.

Inspector Campbell said steadily, "If my men find us dead when they come in here, they'll leave none of you living."



\* \* \* \* \*

Chandra Dass did not even listen to him, but ordered the dark servants sharply, "Attach the weights!"

The Malays had brought from the closet two fifty-pound lead balls, and now they proceeded quickly to tie these to the feet of the two men. Then one of them rolled back the brilliant red Indian rug from the rough pine floor. A square trap-door was disclosed, and at Chandra Dass' order, it was swung upward and open.

Up through the open square came the sound of waves slap-slapping against the piles of the old pier, and the heavy odors of salt water and of rotting wood invaded the room.

"The water under this pier is twenty feet deep," Chandra Dass told the two prisoners. "I regret to give you so easy a death, but there is no opportunity to take you to the fate you deserve."

Ennis, his skin crawling on his flesh, nevertheless spoke rapidly and as steadily as possible to the Hindoo.

"Listen, I don't ask you to let me go, but I'll do anything you want, let you kill me any way you want, if you'll let Ruth----"

Sheer horror cut short his words. The Malay servants had dragged Campbell's bound body to the door in the floor. They shoved him over the edge. Ennis had one glimpse of the inspector's taut, strange face falling out of sight. Then a dull splash sounded instantly below, and then silence.

He felt hands upon himself, dragging him across the floor. He fought, crazily, hopelessly, twisting his body in its bonds, thrashing his bound limbs wildly.

[Illustration: "A shove sent his body scraping over the edge, and he plunged downward through dank darkness."]

He saw the dark, unmoved face of Chandra Dass, the brass lamp over his head, the red hangings. Then his head dangled over the opening, a shove sent his body scraping over the edge, and he plunged downward through dank darkness. With a splash he hit the icy water and went under. The heavy weight at his ankles dragged him irresistibly downward. Instinctively he held his breath as the water rushed upward around him.

His feet struck oozy bottom. His body swayed there, chained by the lead weight to the bottom. His lungs already were bursting to draw in air, slow fires seeming to creep through his breast as he held his breath.

Ennis knew that in a moment or two more he would inhale the strangling waters and die. The thought-picture of Ruth flashed across his despairing mind, wild with hopeless regret. He could no longer hold his breath, felt his muscles relaxing against his will, tasted the stinging salt water at the back of his nose.

Then it was a bursting confusion of swift sensations, the choking water in his nose and throat, the roaring in his ears. A scroll of flame unrolled slowly in his brain and a voice shouted there, "You're dying!" He felt dimly a plucking at his ankles.

Abruptly Ennis' dimming mind was aware that he now was shooting upward through the water. His head burst into open air and he choked, strangled and gasped, his tortured lungs gulping the damp, heavy air. He opened his eyes, and shook the water from them.

He was floating in the darkness at the surface of the water. Someone was floating beside him, supporting him. Ennis' chin bumped the other's shoulder, and he heard a familiar voice.

"Easy, now," said Inspector Campbell. "Wait till I cut your hands loose."

"Campbell!" Ennis choked. "How did you get loose?"

"Never mind that now," the inspector answered. "Don't make any noise, or they may hear us up there."

Ennis felt a knife-blade slashing the bonds at his wrists. Then, the inspector's arm helping him, he and his companion paddled weakly through the darkness under the rotting pier. They bumped against the slimy, moldering piles, threaded through them toward the side of the pier. The waves of the flooding tide washed them up and down as Campbell led the way.

They passed out from under the old pier into the comparative illumination of the stars. Looking back up, Ennis saw the long, black mass of the house of Chandra Dass, resting on the black pier, ruddy light glowing from window-cracks. He collided with something and found that Campbell had led toward a little floating dock where some skiffs were moored. They scrambled up onto it from the water, and lay panting for a few moments.

Campbell had something in his hand, a thin, razor-edged steel blade several inches long. Its hilt was an ordinary leather shoe-heel.

The inspector turned up one of his feet and Ennis saw that the heel was missing from that shoe. Carefully Campbell slid the steel blade beneath the shoe-sole, the heel-hilt sliding into place and seeming merely the

innocent heel of the shoe.

"So that's how you got loose down in the water!" Ennis exclaimed, and the inspector nodded briefly.

"That trick's done me good service before--even with your hands tied behind your back you can get out that knife and use it. It was touch and go, though, whether I could get it out and cut myself loose in the water in time enough to free you."

Ennis gripped the inspector's shoulder. "Campbell, Ruth is in there! By heaven, we've found her and now we can get her out!"

"Right!" said the officer grimly. "We'll go around to the front and in two minutes we'll be in there with my men."

\* \* \* \* \*

They climbed dripping to their feet, and hastened from the little floating dock up onto the shore, through the darkness to the cobbled street.

The shabbily disguised men of Inspector Campbell were not now in front of Chandra Dass' café, but lurking in the shadows across the street. They came running toward Campbell and Ennis.

"All right, we're going in there," Campbell exclaimed in steely tones. "Get Chandra Dass, whatever you do, but see that his prisoners are not harmed."

He snapped a word and one of the men handed pistols to him and to Ennis. Then they leaped toward the door of the Hindoo's café, from which still streamed ruddy light and the babel of many voices.

A kick from Inspector Campbell sent the door flying inward, and they burst in with guns gleaming wickedly in the ruddy light. Ennis' face was a quivering mask of desperate resolve.

The motley patrons jumped up with yells of alarm at their entrance. The hand of a Malay waiter jerked and a thrown knife thudded into the wall beside them. Ennis yelled as he saw Chandra Dass, his dark face startled, leaping back with his servants through the black curtains.

He and Campbell drove through the squealing patrons toward the back. The Malay who had thrown the knife rushed to bar the way, another dagger uplifted. Campbell's gun coughed and the Malay reeled and stumbled. The inspector and Ennis threw themselves at the black curtains--and were dashed back.

They tore aside the black folds. A dull steel door had been lowered behind them, barring the way to the back rooms. Ennis beat crazily upon it with his pistol-butt, but it remained immovable.

"No use--we can't break that down!" yelled Campbell, over the uproar. "Outside, and around to the other end of the building!"

They burst back out through that mad-house, into the dark of the street. They started along the side of the pier toward the river-end, edging forward on a narrow ledge but inches wide. As they reached the back of the building, Ennis shouted and pointed to dark figures at the end of the pier. There were two of them, lowering shapeless, wrapped forms over the end of the pier.

"There they are!" he cried. "They've got their prisoners out there with them."

Campbell's pistol leveled, but Ennis swiftly struck it up. "No, you might hit Ruth."

He and the inspector bounded forward along the pier. Fire streaked from the dark ahead and bullets thumped the rotting boards around them.

Suddenly the loud roar of an accelerated motor drowned out all other sounds. It came from the river at the pier's end.

Campbell and Ennis reached the end in time to see a long, powerful, gray motor-boat dash out into the black obscurity of the river, and roar eastward with gathering speed.

"There they go--they're getting away!" cried the agonized young American.

Inspector Campbell cupped his hands and shouted out into the darkness, "River police, ahoy! Ahoy there!"

He rasped to Ennis. "The river police were to have a cutter here tonight. We can still catch them."

With swiftly rising roar of speeded motors, a big cutter drove in from the darkness. Its searchlight snapped on, bathing the two men on the pier in a blinding glare.

"Ahoy, there!" called a stentorian voice over the roar of the motors. "Is that Inspector Campbell?"

"Yes. Come alongside," yelled the inspector, and as the big cutter shot close to the end of the pier, its reversing propellers churning the dark water to foam, Ennis and Campbell leaped.

They landed amid unseen men in the cockpit, and as he scrambled to his feet the inspector cried, "Follow that boat that just went down-river. But no shooting!"

\* \* \* \* \*

With thunderous drumfire from its exhausts, the cutter jerked forward so rapidly that it almost threw them from their feet again. It shot out onto the bosom of the dark river that flowed like a black sea between the banks of scattered lights that were London.

The moving lights of yachts and barges coming up-river could be seen gliding in that darkness. The captain of the cutter barked an order and one of his three men, the one crouched at the searchlight, switched its powerful beam out over the waters ahead.

In a moment it picked up a distant gray spot racing eastward on the black river, leaving a white trail of foam.

"There she is!" bawled the man at the searchlight. "She's running without lights!"

"Keep her in the searchlight," ordered the captain. "Sound our siren, and give the cutter her head."

Swaying, rocking, the cutter roared on through the darkness on the trail of that distant fleeing speck. As they raced down Blackwall Reach, the distance between the two craft had already begun to lessen.

"We're overtaking him!" cried Campbell, clutching a stanchion and peering ahead against the rush of wind and spray. "He must be making for whatever spot it is in England that is the center of the Brotherhood of the Door--but he'll never reach it."

"He said that within a few hours Ruth would go with the others through the Door!" cried Ennis, clinging beside him. "Campbell, we mustn't let them get away now!"

Pursuers and pursued flashed on down the dark, broadening river, through mazes of shipping, the cutter hanging doggedly to the motor-boat's trail. The lights of London had dropped behind and those of Tilbury now gleamed away on their left.

Bigger, stronger waves now tossed and pounded the cutter as it raced out of the river mouth toward the heaving black expanse of the sea. The Kent coast was a black blur on their right; the gray motor-boat followed it closely, grazing almost beneath the Sheerness lights.

"He's heading to round North Foreland and follow the coast south to Ramsgate or Dover," the cutter captain cried to Campbell. "But we'll catch him before he passes Margate."

The quarry was now but a quarter-mile ahead. Steadily as they roared onward the gap narrowed, until in the glare of the searchlight they could make out every detail of the powerful gray motor-boat plunging through the tossing black waves.

They saw Chandra Dass' dark face turn and look back at them, and the cutter captain raised his speaking-trumpet to his lips and shouted over the roar of motors and dash of waves.

"Stand by or we'll fire at you!"

"He won't obey," muttered Campbell between his teeth. "He knows we daren't fire with the girl in the boat."

"Yes, blast him!" exclaimed the captain. "But we'll have him in a few minutes, anyway."

The thundering chase had brought them into sight of the lights of Margate on the dark coast to their right. Now only a few hundred feet of black water separated them from the fleeing craft.

Ennis and the inspector, gripping the stanchions of the rushing cutter, saw a white figure suddenly stand erect in the boat ahead and wave its arms to them. The gray motor-boat slowed.

"It's Chandra Dass and he's signaling that he's giving up!" Ennis cried. "He's stopping!"

"By heavens, he is!" Campbell explained. "Drive alongside him, and we'll soon have the irons on him."

The cutter, its own motors hastily throttled down, shot through the water toward the slowing gray craft. Ennis saw Chandra Dass standing erect, awaiting their coming, he and the two Malays beside him holding their hands in the air. He saw a half-dozen or more white-wrapped forms in the bottom of the boat, lying motionless.

"There are their prisoners!" he cried. "Bring the boat closer so we can jump in!"

He and Campbell, their pistols out, hunched to jump as the cutter drove closer to the gray motor-boat. The sides of the two craft bumped, the motors of both idling noisily. Then before Ennis and Campbell could jump into the motor-boat, things happened with cinema-like rapidity. Two of the still white forms at the bottom of the motor-boat leaped up and like

suddenly uncoiled springs shot through the air into the cutter. They were two other Malays, their dark faces flaming with fanatic light, keen daggers glinting in their upraised hands.

"Ware a trick!" yelled Campbell. His gun barked, but the bullet missed and a dagger slit his sleeve.

The Malays, with wild, screeching yells, were laying about them with their daggers in the cutter, insanely.

"God in heaven, they're running amok!" choked the cutter captain.

His slashed neck spurting blood and his face livid, he fell. One of his men slumped coughing beside him, another victim of the crazy daggers.

### 3. Up the Water-Tunnel

The man at the searchlight sprang for the maddened Malays, tugging at his pistol as he jumped. Before he got the weapon out, a dagger slashed his jugular and he went down gurgling in death. One of the Malays meanwhile had knocked Inspector Campbell from his feet, his knife-hand swooping down, his eyes blazing.

Ennis' gun roared and the bullet hit the Malay between the eyes. But as he slumped limply, the other fanatic was upon Ennis from the side. Before Ennis could whirl to meet him, the attacker's knife grazed down past his cheek like a brand of living fire. He was borne backward by the rush, felt the hot breath of the crazed Malay in his face, the dagger-point at his throat.

Shots roared quickly, one after another, and with each shot the Malay pressing Ennis back jerked convulsively. With the light of murderous madness fading from his eyes, he still strove to drive the dagger home into the American's throat. But a hand jerked him back and he lay prostrate and still.

Ennis scrambled up to find Inspector Campbell, pale and determined, over him. The detective had shot the attacker from behind.

The captain of the cutter and two of his men lay dead in the cockpit beside the two Malays. The remaining seaman, the helmsman, held his shoulder and groaned.

Ennis whirled. The motor-boat of Chandra Dass was no longer beside the cutter, and there was no sight of it anywhere on the black sea ahead.

The Hindoo had taken advantage of the fight to make good his escape with his two other servants and their prisoners.

"Campbell, he's gone!" cried the young American frantically. "He's got away!"

The inspector's eyes were bright with cold flame of anger. "Yes, Chandra Dass sacrificed these two Malays to hold us up long enough for him to escape."

Campbell whirled to the helmsman. "You're not badly hurt?"

"Only a scratch, but I nearly broke my shoulder when I fell," answered the man.

"Then head on around North Foreland!" Campbell cried. "We may still be able to catch up to them."

"But Captain Wilson and the others are killed," protested the helmsman. "I've got to report----"

"You can report later," rasped the inspector. "Do as I say--I'll be responsible."

"Very well, sir," said the helmsman, and jumped back to the wheel.

In a minute the big cutter was roaring ahead over the heaving black waves, its searchlight clawing the darkness ahead. There was no sign now of the craft of Chandra Dass ahead. They raced abreast of the lights of Margate, started rounding the North Foreland, pounded by bigger seas.

Inspector Campbell had dragged the bodies of the dead policemen and their two slayers down into the cabin of the cutter. He came up and crouched down with Ennis beside Sturt, the helmsman.

"I found these on the two Malays," Campbell shouted to the American, holding out two little objects in his spray-wet hand.

Each was a flat star of gray metal in which was set a large oval, cabochon-cut jewel. The jewels flashed and dazzled with deep color, but it was a color wholly unfamiliar and alien to their eyes.

"They're not any color we know on earth," Campbell shouted. "I believe these jewels came from somewhere beyond the Door, and that these are badges of the Brotherhood of the Door."

Sturt, the helmsman, leaned toward the inspector. "We've rounded North Foreland, sir," he cried. "Head straight south along the coast," Campbell ordered. "Chandra Dass must have gone this way. No doubt he



thinks he's shaken us off, and is making for the gathering-place of the Brotherhood, wherever that may be."

"The cutter isn't built for seas like this," Sturt said, shaking his head. "But I'll do it."

They were now following the coast southward, the lights of Ramsgate dropping back on their right. The waters out here in the Channel were wilder, great black waves tossing the cutter to the sky one moment, and then dropping it sickeningly the next. Frequently its screws raced loudly as they encountered no resistance but air.

Ennis, clinging precariously on the foredeck, turned the searchlight's stabbing white beam back and forth on the heaving dark sea ahead, but without any sign of their quarry disclosed.

White foam of breaking waves began to show around them like bared teeth, and there was a humming in the air.

"Storm coming up the Channel," Sturt exclaimed. "It'll do for us if it catches us out here."

"We've got to keep on," Ennis told him desperately. "We must come up with them soon!"

The coast on their right was now one of black, rocky cliffs, towering all along the shore in a jagged, frowning wall against which the waves dashed foamy white. The cutter crept southward over the wild waters, tossed like a chip upon the great waves. Sturt was having a hard time holding the craft out from the rocks, and had its prow pointed obliquely away from them.

The humming in the air changed to a shrill whistling as the outrider winds of the storm came upon them. The cutter tossed still more wildly and black masses of water smashed in upon them from the darkness, dazing and drenching them.

Suddenly Ennis yelled, "There's the lights of a boat ahead! There, moving in toward the cliffs!"

He pointed ahead, and Campbell and the helmsman peered through the blinding spray and darkness. A pair of low lights were moving at high speed on the waters there, straight toward the towering black cliffs. Then they vanished suddenly from sight.

"There must be a hidden opening or harbor of some kind in the cliffs!" Inspector Campbell exclaimed. "But that can't be Chandra Dass' boat, for it carried no lights."

"It might be others of the Brotherhood going to the meeting-place!" Ennis exclaimed. "We can follow and see."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sturt thrust his head through the flying spray and shouted, "There are openings and water-caverns in plenty along these cliffs, but there's nothing in any of them."

"We'll find out," Campbell said. "Head straight toward the cliffs in there where that boat vanished."

"If we can't find the opening we'll be smashed to flinders on those cliffs," Sturt warned.

"I'm gambling that we'll find the opening," Campbell told him. "Go ahead."

Sturt's face set stolidly and he said, "Yes, sir."

He turned the prow of the cutter toward the cliffs. Instantly they dashed forward toward the rock walls with greatly increased speed, wild waves bearing them onward like charging stallions of the sea.

Hunched beside the helmsman, the searchlight stabbing the dark wildly as the cutter was flung forward by the waves, Ennis and the inspector watched as the cliffs loomed closer ahead. The brilliant white beam struck across the rushing, mountainous waves and showed only the towering barriers of rock, battered and smitten by the raving waters that frothed white. They could hear the booming thunder of the raging ocean striking the rock.

Like a projectile hurled by a giant hand, the cutter fairly flew now toward the cliffs. They now could see even the little streams that ran off the rough rock wall as each giant wave broke against it. They were almost upon it.

Sturt's face was deathly. "I don't see any opening!" he yelled. "And we're going to hit in a moment!"

"To your left!" screamed Inspector Campbell over the booming thunder. "There's an arched opening there."

Now Ennis saw it also, a huge arch-like opening in the cliff that had been concealed by an angle of the wall. Sturt tried frantically to head the cutter toward it, but the wheel was useless as the great waves bore the craft along. Ennis saw they would strike a little to the side of the opening. The cliff loomed ahead, and he closed his eyes to the impact.

There was no impact. And as he heard a hoarse cry from Inspector Campbell, he opened his eyes.

The cutter was flying in through the mighty opening, snatched into it by powerful currents. They were whirled irresistibly forward under the huge rock arch, which loomed forty feet over their heads. Before them stretched a winding water-tunnel inside the cliff.

And now they were out of the wild uproar of the storming waters outside, and in an almost stupefying silence. Smoothly, resistlessly, the current bore them on in the tunnel, whose winding turns ahead were lit up by their searchlight.

"God, that was close!" exclaimed Inspector Campbell.

His eyes flashed. "Ennis, I believe that we have found the gathering-place of the Brotherhood. That boat we sighted is somewhere ahead in here, and so must be Chandra Dass, and your wife."

Ennis' hand tightened on his gun-butt. "If that's so--if we can just find them----"

"Blind action won't help if we do," said the inspector swiftly. "There must be all the number of the Brotherhood's members assembled here, and we can't fight them all."

His eyes suddenly lit and he took the blazing jeweled stars from his pocket. "These badges! With them we can pose as members of the Brotherhood, perhaps long enough to find your wife."

"But Chandra Dass will be there, and if he sees us----"

Campbell shrugged. "We'll have to take that chance. It's the only course open to us."

The current of the inflowing tide was still bearing them smoothly onward through the winding water-tunnel, around bends and angles where they scraped the rock, down long straight stretches. Sturt used the motors to guide them around the turns. Meanwhile, Inspector Campbell and Ennis quickly ripped from the cutter its police-insignia and covered all evidences of its being a police craft.

Sturt suddenly snicked off the searchlight. "Light ahead there!" he exclaimed.

Around the next turn of the water-tunnel showed a gleam of strange, soft light.

"Careful, now!" cautioned the inspector. "Sturt, whatever we do, you

stay in the cutter. And try to have it ready for a quick getaway, if we leave it."

Sturt nodded silently. The helmsman's stolid face had become a little pale, but he showed no sign of losing his courage.

\* \* \* \* \*

The cutter sped around the next turn of the tunnel and emerged into a huge, softly lit cavern. Sturt's eyes bulged and Campbell uttered an exclamation of amazement. For in this mighty water-cavern there floated in a great mass, scores of sea-going craft, large and small.

All of them were capable of breasting storm and wind, and some were so large they could barely have entered. There were small yachts, big motor-cruisers, sea-going launches, cutters larger than their own, and among them the gray motor-launch of Chandra Dass.

They were massed together here, those with masts having lowered them to enter, floating and rubbing sides, quite unoccupied. Around the edges of the water-cavern ran a wide rock ledge. But no living person was visible and there was no visible source for the soft, strange white light that filled the astounding place.

"These craft must have come here from all over earth!" Campbell muttered. "The Brotherhood of the Door has assembled here--we've found their gathering-place all right."

"But where are they?" exclaimed Ennis. "I don't see anyone."

"We'll soon find out," the inspector said. "Sturt, run close to the ledge there and we'll get out on it."

Sturt obeyed, and as the cutter bumped the ledge, Campbell and Ennis leaped out onto it. They looked this way and that along it, but no one was in sight. The weirdness of it was unnerving, the strangely lit, mighty cavern, the assembled boats, the utter silence.

"Follow me," Campbell said in a low voice. "They must all be somewhere near."

He and Ennis walked a few steps along the ledge, when the American stopped. "Campbell, listen!" he whispered.

Dimly there whispered to them, as though from a distance and through great walls, a swelling sound of chanting. As they listened, hearts beating rapidly, a square of the rock wall of the cavern abruptly flew open beside them, as though hinged like a door. Inside it was the mouth of a soft-lit, man-high tunnel, and in its opening stood two men. They

wore over their clothing shroud-like, loose-hanging robes of gray, asbestos-like material. They wore hoods of the same gray stuff over their heads, pierced with slits at the eyes and mouth. And each wore on his breast the blazing star-badge.

Through the eye-slits the eyes of the two surveyed Campbell and Ennis as they halted, transfixed by the sudden apparition. Then one of the hooded men spoke measuredly in a hissing, Mongolian voice.

"Are you who come here of the Brotherhood of the Door?" he asked, apparently repeating a customary challenge.

Campbell answered, his flat voice tremorless. "We are of the Brotherhood."

"Why do you not wear the badge of the Brotherhood, then?"

For answer, the inspector reached in his pocket for the strange emblem and fastened it to his lapel. Ennis did the same.

"Enter, brothers," said the hissing, hooded shape, standing aside to let them pass.

As they stepped into the tunnel, the hooded guard added in slightly more natural tones, "Brothers, you two are late. You must hurry to get your protective robes, for the ceremony soon begins."

Campbell inclined his head without speaking, and he and Ennis started along the tunnel. Its light, as sourceless as that of the great water-cavern, revealed that it was chiseled from solid rock and that it wound downward.

When they were out of sight of the two hooded guards, Ennis clutched the detective's arm convulsively.

"Campbell," he said, "the ceremony begins soon! We've got to find Ruth first!"

"We'll try," the inspector answered swiftly. "Those hooded robes are apparently issued to all the members to be worn during the ceremony as protection, for some reason, and once we get robes and get them on, Chandra Dass won't be able to spot us.

"Look out!" he added an instant later. "Here's the place where the robes are issued!"

The tunnel had debouched suddenly into a wider space in which were a group of men. Several were wearing the concealing hoods and robes, and one of these hooded figures was handing out, from a large rack of the

robes, three of the garments to three dark Easterners who had apparently entered in the boat just ahead of the cutter.

The three dark Orientals, their faces gleaming with strange fanaticism, quickly donned the robes and hoods and passed hurriedly on down the tunnel. At once Campbell and Ennis stepped calmly up to the hooded custodians of the robes, and extended their hands.

One of the hooded figures took down two robes and handed them to them. But suddenly one of the other hooded men spoke sharply.

Instantly all the hooded men but the one who had spoken, with loud cries, threw themselves forward on Campbell and Paul Ennis.

Taken utterly by surprise, the two had no chance to draw their guns. They were smothered by gray-robed men, held helpless before they could move, a half-dozen pistols jammed into their bodies.

Stupefied by the sudden dashing of their hopes, the detective and the young American saw the hooded man who had spoken slowly lift the concealing gray cowl from his face. It was the dark, coldly contemptuous face of Chandra Dass.

#### 4. The Cavern of the Door

Chandra Dass spoke, and his strong, vibrant voice held a scorn that was almost pitying.

"It occurred to me that your enterprise might enable you to escape the daggers of my followers, and that you might trail us here," he said.

"That is why I waited here to see if you came.

"Search them," he told the other hooded figures. "Take anything that looks like a weapon from them."

Ennis stared, stupefied, as the gray-hooded men obeyed. He was unable to believe entirely in the abrupt reversal of all their hopes, of their desperate attempt.

The hooded men took their pistols from Ennis and Campbell, and even the small gold knife attached to the chain of the inspector's big, old-fashioned gold watch. Then they stepped back, the pistols of two of them leveled at the hearts of the captives.

Chandra Dass had watched impassively. Ennis, staring dazedly, noted that

the Hindoo wore on his breast a different jewel-emblem from the others, a double star instead of a single one.

Ennis' dazed eyes lifted from the blazing badge to the Hindoo's dark face. "Where's Ruth?" he asked a little shrilly, and then his voice cracked and he cried, "You damned fiend, where's my wife?"

"Be comforted, Mr. Ennis," came Chandra Dass' chill voice. "You are going now to join your wife, and to share her fate. You two are going with her and the other sacrifices through the Door when it opens. It is not usual," he added in cold mockery, "for our sacrificial victims to walk directly into our hands. We ordinarily have a more difficult time securing them."

He made a gesture to the two hooded men with pistols, and they ranged themselves close behind Campbell and Ennis.

"We are going to the Cavern of the Door," said the Hindoo. "Inspector Campbell, I know and respect your resourcefulness. Be warned that your slightest attempt to escape means a bullet in your back. You two will march ahead of us," he said, and added mockingly, "Remember, while you live you can cling to the shadow of hope, but if these guns speak, it ends even that shadow."

Ennis and Inspector Campbell, keeping their hands elevated, started at the Hindoo's command down the softly lit rock tunnel. Chandra Dass and the two hooded men with pistols followed.

Ennis saw that the inspector's sagging face was expressionless, and knew that behind that colorless mask, Campbell's brain was racing in an attempt to find a method of escape. For himself, the young American had almost forgotten all else in his eagerness to reach his wife. Whatever happened to Ruth, whatever mysterious horror lay in wait for her and the other victims, he would be there beside her, sharing it!

The tunnel wound a little further downward, then straightened out and ran straight for a considerable length. In this straight section of the rock passage, Ennis and Campbell for the first time perceived that the walls of the tunnel bore crowding, deeply chiseled inscriptions. They had not time to read them in passing, but Ennis saw that they were in many different languages, and that some of the characters were wholly unfamiliar.

"God, some of those inscriptions are in Egyptian hieroglyphics!" muttered Inspector Campbell.

The cool voice of Chandra Dass said, behind them, "There are pre-Egyptian inscriptions on these walls, inspector, could you but recognize them, carven in languages that perished from the face of earth

before Egypt was born. Yes, back through time, back through mediæval and Roman and Egyptian and pre-Egyptian ages, the Brotherhood of the Door has existed and has each year gathered in this place to open the Door and worship with sacrifices They Beyond it."

The fanatic note of unearthly devotion was in his voice now, and Ennis shuddered with a cold not of the tunnel.

As they proceeded, they heard a muffled, hoarse booming somewhere over their heads, a dull, rhythmic thunder that echoed along the long passageway. The walls of the tunnel now were damp and glistening in the sourceless soft light, tiny trickles running down them.

"You hear the ocean over us," came Chandra Dass' voice. "The Cavern of the Door lies several hundred yards out from shore, beneath the rock floor of the sea."

They passed the dark mouths of unlit tunnels branching ahead from this illuminated one. Then over the booming of the raging sea above them, there came to Ennis' ears the distant, swelling chant they had heard in the water-cavern above. But now it was louder, nearer. At the sound of it, Chandra Dass quickened their pace.

Suddenly Inspector Campbell stumbled on the slippery rock floor and went down in a heap. Instantly Chandra Dass and his two followers recoiled from them, the two pistols trained on the detective as he scrambled up.

"Do not do that again, inspector," warned the Hindoo in a deadly voice. "All tricks are useless now."

"I couldn't help slipping on this wet floor," complained Inspector Campbell.

"The next time you make a wrong step of any kind, a bullet will smash your spine," Chandra Dass told him. "Quick--march!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The tunnel turned sharply, turned again. As they rounded the turns, Ennis saw with a sudden electric thrill of hope that Campbell held clutched in his hand, concealed by his sleeve, the heel-hilted knife from his shoe. He had drawn it when he stumbled.

Campbell edged a little closer to the young American as they were hastening onward, and whispered to him, a word at a time.

"Be--ready--to jump--them----"

"But they'll shoot, your first move----" whispered Ennis agonizedly.



Campbell did not answer. But Ennis sensed the detective's body tautening.

They came to another turn, the strong, swelling chant coming loud from ahead. They started around that turn.

Then Inspector Campbell acted. He whirled as though on a pivot, the heel-knife flashing toward the men behind them.

Shots coughed from the pistols that were pressed almost against his stomach. His body jerked as the bullets struck it, yet he remained erect, his knife stabbing with lightning rapidity.

One of the hooded men slumped down with a pierced throat, and as Campbell sprang at the other, Ennis desperately launched himself at Chandra Dass. He bore the Hindoo from his feet, but it was as though he was fighting a demon. Inside his gray robe, Chandra Dass writhed with fiendish strength.

Ennis could not hold him, the Hindoo's body seeming of spring-steel. He rolled over, dashed the young American to the floor, and leaped up, his dark face and great black eyes blazing.

Then, half-way erect, he suddenly crumpled, the fire in his eyes dulling, a call for help smothered on his lips. He fell on his face, and Ennis saw that the heel-knife was stuck in his back. Inspector Campbell jerked it out, and put it back into his shoe. And now Ennis, staggering up, saw that Campbell had knifed the two hooded guards and that they lay in a dead heap.

"Campbell!" cried the American, gripping the detective's arm. "They've wounded you--I saw them shoot you."

Campbell's bruised face grinned briefly. "Nothing of the kind," he said, and tapped the soiled gray vest he wore beneath his coat. "Chandra Dass didn't know this vest is bullet-proof."

He darted an alert glance up and down the lighted tunnel. "We can't stay here or let these bodies lie here. They may be discovered at any moment."

"Listen!" said Ennis, turning.

The chanting from ahead swelled down the tunnel, louder than at any time yet, waxing and waxing, reaching a triumphant crescendo, then again dying away.

"Campbell, they're going on with the ceremony now!" Ennis cried. "Ruth!"

The detective's desperate glance fastened on the dark mouth of one of the branching tunnels, a little ahead.

"That side tunnel--we'll pull the bodies in there!" he exclaimed.

Taking the pistols of the dead men for themselves, they rapidly dragged the three bodies into the darkness of the unlit branching tunnel.

"Quick, on with two of these robes," rasped Inspector Campbell. "They'll give us a little better chance."

Hastily Ennis jerked the gray robe and hood from Chandra Dass' dead body and donned it, while Campbell struggled into one of the others. In the robes and concealing hoods, they could not be told from any other two members of the Brotherhood, except that the badge on Ennis' breast was the double star instead of the single one.

Ennis then spun toward the main, lighted tunnel, Campbell close behind him. They recoiled suddenly into the darkness of the branching way, as they heard hurrying steps out in the lighted passage. Flattened in the darkness against the wall, they saw several of the gray-hooded members of the Brotherhood hasten past them from above, hurrying toward the gathering-place.

"The guards and robe-issuers we saw above!" Campbell said quickly when they were passed. "Come on, now."

He and Ennis slipped out into the lighted tunnel and hastened along it after the others.

Boom of thundering ocean over their heads and rising and falling of the tremendous chanting ahead filled their ears as they hurried around the last turns of the tunnel. The passage widened, and ahead they saw a massive rock portal through whose opening they glimpsed an immense, lighted space.

Campbell and Ennis, two comparatively tiny gray-hooded figures, hastened through the mighty portal. Then they stopped. Ennis felt frozen with the dazing shock of it. He heard the detective whisper fiercely beside him.

"It's the Cavern, all right--the Cavern of the Door!"

\* \* \* \* \*

They looked across a colossal rock chamber hollowed out beneath the floor of ocean. It was elliptical in shape, three hundred feet by its longer axis. Its black basalt sides, towering, rough-hewn walls, rose sheer and supported the rock ceiling which was the ocean floor, a

hundred feet over their heads.

This mighty cathedral hewn from inside the rock of earth was lit by a soft, white, sourceless light like that in the main tunnel. Upon the floor of the cavern, in regular rows across it, stood hundreds on hundreds of human figures, all gray-robed and gray-hooded, all with their backs to Campbell and Ennis, looking across the cavern to its farther end. At that farther end was a flat dais of black basalt upon which stood five hooded men, four wearing the blazing double-star on their breasts, the fifth, a triple-star. Two of them stood beside a cubical, weird-looking gray metal mechanism from which upreared a spherical web of countless fine wires, unthinkably intricate in their network, many of them pulsing with glowing force. The sourceless light of the cavern and the tunnel seemed to pulse from that weird mechanism.

Up from that machine, if machine it was, soared the black basalt wall of that end of the cavern. But there above the gray mechanism the rough wall had been carved with a great, smooth facet, a giant, gleaming black oval face as smooth as though planed and polished. Only, at the middle of the glistening black oval face, were carved deeply four large and wholly unfamiliar characters. As Ennis and Campbell stared frozenly across the awe-inspiring place, sound swelled from the hundreds of throats. A slow, rising chant, it climbed and climbed until the basalt roof above seemed to quiver to it, crashing out with stupendous effect, a weird litany in an unknown tongue. Then it began to fall.

Ennis clutched the inspector's gray-robed arm. "Where's Ruth?" he whispered frantically. "I don't see any prisoners."

"They must be somewhere here," Campbell said swiftly. "Listen----"

As the chant died to silence, on the dais at the farther end of the cavern the hooded man who wore the triple-jeweled star stepped forward and spoke. His deep, heavy voice rolled out and echoed across the cavern, flung back and forth from wall to rocky wall.

"Brothers of the Door," he said, "we meet again here in the Cavern of the Door this year, as for ten thousand years past our forefathers have met here to worship They Beyond the Door, and bring them the sacrifices They love.

"A hundred centuries have gone by since first They Beyond the Door sent their wisdom through the barrier between their universe and ours, a barrier which even They could not open from their side, but which their wisdom taught our fathers how to open.

"Each year since then have we opened the Door which They taught us how to build. Each year we have brought them sacrifices. And in return They have given us of their wisdom and power. They have taught us things that

lie hidden from other men, and They have given us powers that other men have not.

"Now again comes the time appointed for the opening of the Door. In their universe on the other side of it, They are waiting now to take the sacrifices which we have procured for them. The hour strikes, so let the sacrifices be brought."

As though at a signal, from a small opening at one side of the cavern a triple file of marchers entered. A file of hooded gray members of the Brotherhood flanked on either side a line of men and women who did not wear the hoods or robes. They were thirty or forty in number. These men and women were of almost all races and classes, but all of them walked stiffly, mechanically, staring ahead with unseeing, distended eyes, like living corpses.

"Drugged!" came Campbell's shaken voice. "They're all drugged, and don't know what is going on."

Ennis' eyes fastened on a small, slender girl with chestnut hair who walked at the end of the line, a girl in a straight tan dress, whose face was white, stiff, like those of the others.

"There's Ruth!" he exclaimed frantically, his cry muffled by his hood.

He plunged in that direction, but Campbell held him back.

"No!" rasped the inspector. "You can't help her by simply getting yourself captured!"

"I can at least go with her!" Ennis exclaimed. "Let me go!"

Inspector Campbell's iron grip held him. "Wait, Ennis!" said the detective. "You've no chance that way. That robe of Chandra Dass' you're wearing has a double-star badge like those of the men up there on the dais. That means that as Chandra Dass you're entitled to be up there with them. Go up there and take your place as though you were Chandra Dass--with the hood on, they can't tell the difference. I'll slip around to that side door out of which they brought the prisoners. It must connect with the tunnels, and it's not far from the dais. When I fire my pistol from there, you grab your wife and try to get to that door with her. If you can do it, we'll have a chance to get up through the tunnels and escape."

Ennis wrung the inspector's hand. Then, without further reply, he walked boldly with measured steps up the main aisle of the cavern, through the gray ranks to the dais. He stepped up onto it, his heart racing. The chief priest, he of the triple-star, gave him only a glance, as of annoyance at his lateness. Ennis saw Campbell's gray figure slipping

round to the side door.

The gray-hooded hundreds before him had paid no attention to either of them. Their attention was utterly, eagerly, fixed upon the stiff-moving prisoners now being marched up onto the dais. Ennis saw Ruth pass him, her white face an unfamiliar, staring mask.

The prisoners were ranged at the back of the dais, just beneath the great, gleaming black oval facet. The guards stepped back from them, and they remained standing stiffly there. Ennis edged a little toward Ruth, who stood at the end of that line of stiff figures. As he moved imperceptibly closer to her, he saw the two priests beside the gray mechanism reaching toward knurled knobs of ebonite affixed to its side, beneath the spherical web of pulsing wires.

The chief priest, at the front of the dais, raised his hands. His voice rolled out, heavy, commanding, reverberating again through all the cavern.

## \_5. The Door Opens\_

"Where leads the Door?" rolled the chief priest's voice.

Back up to him came the reply of hundreds of voices, muffled by the hoods but loud, echoing to the roof of the cavern in a thunderous response.

"\_It leads outside our world!\_"

The chief priest waited until the echoes died before his deep voice rolled on in the ritual.

"Who taught our forefathers to open the Door?"

Ennis, edging desperately closer and closer to the line of victims, felt the mighty response reverberate about him.

"\_They Beyond the Door taught them!\_"

Now Ennis was apart from the other priests on the dais, within a few yards of the captives, of the small figure of Ruth.

"To whom do we bring these sacrifices?"

As the high priest uttered the words, and before the booming answer

came, a hand grasped Ennis and pulled him back from the line of victims. He spun round to find that it was one of the other priests who had jerked him back.

"\_We bring them to Those Beyond the Door!\_"

As the colossal response thundered, the priest who had jerked Ennis back whispered urgently to him. "You go too close to the victims, Chandra Dass! Do you wish to be taken with them?"

The fellow had a tight grip on Ennis' arm. Desperate, tensed, Ennis heard the chief priest roll forth the last of the ritual.

"Shall the Door be opened that They may take the sacrifices?"

Stunning, mighty, a tremendous shout that mingled in it worshipping awe and superhuman dread, the answer crashed back.

\_"Let the Door be opened!"\_

The chief priest turned and his up-flung arms whirled in a signal. Ennis, tensing to spring toward Ruth, saw the two priests at the gray mechanism swiftly turn the knurled black knobs. Then Ennis, like all else in the vast cavern, was held frozen and spellbound by what followed.

The spherical web of wires pulsed up madly with shining force. And up at the center of the gleaming black oval facet on the wall, there appeared a spark of unearthly green light. It blossomed outward, expanded, an awful viridescent flower blooming quickly outward farther and farther. And as it expanded, Ennis saw that he could look through that green light! He looked through into another universe, a universe lying infinitely far across alien dimensions from our own, yet one that could be reached through this door between dimensions. It was a green universe, flooded with an awful green light that was somehow more akin to darkness than to light, a throbbing, baleful luminescence.

Ennis saw dimly through green-lit spaces a city in the near distance, an unholy city of emerald hue whose unsymmetrical, twisted towers and minarets aspired into heavens of hellish viridity. The towers of that city swayed to and fro and writhed in the air. And Ennis saw that here and there in the soft green substance of that restless city were circles of lurid light that were like yellow eyes.

In ghastly, soul-shaking apprehension of the utterly alien, Ennis knew that the yellow circles were eyes --that that hell-spawned city of another universe was living --that its unfamiliar life was single yet multiple, that its lurid eyes looked now through the Door!

Out from the insane living metropolis glided pseudopods of its green substance, glided toward the Door. Ennis saw that in the end of each pseudopod was one of the lurid eyes. He saw those eyed pseudopods come questing through the Door, onto the dais.

The yellow eyes of light seemed fixed on the row of stiff victims, and the pseudopods glided toward them. Through the open door was beating wave on wave of unfamiliar, tingling forces that Ennis felt even through the protective robe.

The hooded multitude bent in awe as the green pseudopods glided toward the victims faster, with avid eagerness. Ennis saw them reaching for the prisoners, for Ruth, and he made a tremendous mental effort to break the spell that froze him. In that moment pistol-shots crashed across the cavern and a stream of bullets smashed the pulsing web of wires!

The Door began instantly to close. Darkness crept back around the edges of the mighty oval. As though alarmed, the lurid-eyed pseudopods of that hell-city recoiled from the victims, back through the dwindling Door. And as the Door dwindled, the light in the cavern was failing.

"Ruth!" yelled Ennis madly, and sprang forward and grasped her, his pistol leaping into his other hand.

"Ennis--quick!" shouted Campbell's voice across the cavern.

The Door dwindled away altogether; the great oval facet was completely black. The light was fast dying too.

The chief priest sprang madly toward Ennis, and as he did so, the hooded hordes of the Brotherhood recovered from their paralysis of horror and surged madly toward the dais.

"The Door is closed! Death to the blasphemers!" cried the chief priest as he plunged forward.

"Death to the blasphemers!" shrieked the crazed horde below.

Ennis' pistol roared and the chief priest went down. The light in the cavern died completely at that moment.

In the dark a torrent of bodies catapulted against Ennis, screaming vengeance. He struck out with his pistol-barrel in the mad mêlée, holding Ruth's stiff form close with his other hand. He heard the other drugged, helpless victims crushed down and trampled under foot by the surging horde of vengeance-mad members.

\* \* \* \* \*

Clinging to the girl, Ennis fought like a madman through a darkness in which none could distinguish friend or foe, toward the door at the side from which Campbell had fired. He smashed down the pistol-barrel on all before him, as hands sought to grab him in the dark. He knew sickeningly that he was lost in the combat, with no sense of the direction of the door.

Then a voice roared loud across the wild din, "Ennis, this way! This way, Ennis!" yelled Inspector Campbell, again and again.

Ennis plunged through the whirl of unseen bodies in the direction of the detective's shouting voice. He smashed through, half dragging and half carrying the girl, until Campbell's voice was close ahead in the dark. He fumbled at the rock wall, found the door opening, and then Campbell's hands grasped him to pull him inside.

Hands grabbed him from behind, striving to tear Ruth from him, to jerk him back. Voices shrieked for help.

Campbell's pistol blazed in the dark and the hands released their grip. Ennis stumbled with the girl through the door into a dark tunnel. He heard Campbell slam a door shut, and heard a bar fall with a clang.

"Quick, for God's sake!" panted Campbell in the dark. "They'll follow us--we've got to get up through the tunnels to the water-cavern!"

They raced along the pitch-dark tunnel, Campbell now carrying the girl, Ennis reeling drunkenly along.

They heard a mounting roar behind them, and as they burst into the main tunnel, no longer lighted but dark like the others, they looked back and saw a flickering of light coming up the passage.

"They're after us and they've got lights!" Campbell cried. "Hurry!"

It was nightmare, this mad flight on stumbling feet up through the dark tunnels where they could hear the sea booming close overhead, and could hear the wild pursuit behind.

Their feet slipped on the damp floor and they crashed into the walls of the tunnel at the turns. The pursuit was closer behind--as they started climbing the last passages to the water-cavern, the torchlight behind showed them to their pursuers and wild yells came to their ears.

They had before them only the last ascent to the water-cavern when Ennis stumbled and went down. He swayed up a little, yelled to Campbell. "Go on--get Ruth out! I'll try to hold them back a moment!"

"No!" rasped Campbell. "There's another way--one that may mean the end



for us too, but our only chance!"

The inspector thrust his hand into his pocket, snatched out his big, old-fashioned gold watch.

He tore it from its chain, turned the stem of it twice around. Then he hurled it back down the tunnel with all his force.

"Quick--out of the tunnels now or we'll die right here!" he yelled.

They lunged forward, Campbell dragging both the girl and the exhausted Ennis, and emerged a moment later into the great water-cavern. It was now lit only by the searchlight of their waiting cutter.

As they emerged into the cavern, they were thrown flat on the rock ledge by a violent movement of it under them. An awful detonation and thunderous crashing of falling rock smote their ears.

Following that first tremendous crash, giant rumbling of collapsing rock shook the water-cavern.

"To the cutter!" Campbell cried. "That watch of mine was filled with the most concentrated high-explosive known, and it's blown up the tunnels. Now it's touched off more collapses and all these caverns and passages will fall in on us at any moment!"

The awful rumbling and crashing of collapsing rock masses was deafening in their ears as they lurched toward the cutter. Great chunks of rock were falling from the cavern roof into the water.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sturt, white-faced but asking no questions, had the motor of the cutter running, and helped them pull the unconscious girl aboard.

"Out of the tunnel at once!" Campbell ordered. "Full speed!"

They roared down the water-tunnel at crazy velocity, the searchlight beam stabbing ahead. The tide had reached flood and turned, increasing the speed with which they dashed through the tunnel.

Masses of rock fell with loud splashes behind them, and all around them was still the ominous grinding of mighty weights of rock. The walls of the tunnel quivered repeatedly.

Sturt suddenly reversed the propellers, but in spite of his action the cutter smashed a moment later into a solid rock wall. It was a mass of rock forming an unbroken barrier across the water-tunnel, extending beneath the surface of the water.

"We're trapped!" cried Sturt. "A mass of the rock has settled here and blocked the tunnel."

"It can't be completely blocked!" Campbell exclaimed. "See, the tide still runs out beneath it. Our one chance is to swim out under the blocking mass of rock, before the whole cliff gives way!"

"But there's no telling how far the block may extend----" Sturt cried.

Then as Campbell and Ennis stripped off their coats and shoes, he followed their example. The rumble of grinding rock around them was now continuous and nerve-shattering.

Campbell helped Ennis lower Ruth's unconscious form into the water.

"Keep your hand over her nose and mouth!" cried the inspector. "Come on, now!"

Sturt went first, his face pale in the searchlight beam as he dived under the rock mass. The tidal current carried him out of sight in a moment.

Then, holding the girl between them, and with Ennis' hand covering her mouth and nostrils, the other two dived. Down through the cold waters they shot, and then the swift current was carrying them forward like a mill-race, their bodies bumping and scraping against the rock mass overhead.

Ennis' lungs began to burn, his brain to reel, as they rushed on in the waters, still holding the girl tightly. They struck solid rock, a wall across their way. The current sucked them downward, to a small opening at the bottom. They wedged in it, struggled fiercely, then tore through it. They rose on the other side of it into pure air. They were in the darkness, floating in the tunnel beyond the block, the current carrying them swiftly onward.

The walls were shaking and roaring frightfully about them as they were borne round the turns of the tunnel. Then they saw ahead of them a circle of dim light, pricked with white stars.

The current bore them out into that starlight, into the open sea. Before them in the water floated Sturt, and they swam with him out from the shaking, grinding cliffs.

The girl stirred a little in Ennis' grasp, and he saw in the starlight that her face was no longer dazed.

"Paul----" she muttered, clinging close to Ennis in the water.

"She's coming back to consciousness--the water must have revived her from that drug!" he cried.

But he was cut short by Campbell's cry. "Look! Look!" cried the inspector, pointing back at the black cliffs.

In the starlight the whole cliff was collapsing, with a prolonged, terrible roar as of grinding planets, its face breaking and buckling. The waters around them boiled furiously, whirling them this way and that.

Then the waters quieted. They found they had been flung near a sandy spit beyond the shattered cliffs, and they swam toward it.

"The whole underground honeycomb of caverns and tunnels gave way and the sea poured in!" Campbell cried. "The Door, and the Brotherhood of the Door, are ended for ever!"

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## AM I STILL THERE?

by James R. Hall

*Which must in essence, of course,  
simply be the question "What do I  
mean by 'I'?"*

Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from *Analog Science Fact & Fiction September 1963*. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.

Lee slid off the examining table and began buttoning his shirt. He had had a medical examination every six months of his adult life, and it always seemed strange to him that, despite the banks of machines the doctor had which could practically map a man from a single cell outward, each examination always entailed the cold end of a stethoscope against his chest.

He tucked his shirt into his pants and turned to the examining doctor who was writing on a chart.

"Well?" Lee asked him.

"Sound as a dollar," replied the doctor. "Of course Dr. Flotman or Dr. Roberts might turn up something on their electronic monsters, but I see no reason why we can't go ahead on schedule."

Lee felt relieved. Even while being examined by technicians, M.D.'s and biologists, he had been conscious of the hundreds of little dull pains which had nibbled like mice in every corner of his brain. Sometimes he felt like a piece of his brain was being completely smothered, a horrible sensation of having a part of his head severed from him. This would go away, but would appear again in a different area, usually in about fifteen to thirty minutes. Well, the doctor said he was fit for surgery. That would end this nagging pain, just as it always had in the past.

"... If you're ready now." Lee became aware the doctor was speaking to him.

"Oh," Lee said. He had no idea what the doctor was talking about. "I'm sorry, I guess I didn't hear what you said--"

The doctor smiled tolerantly. "I said you can see Dr. Letzmler this afternoon to get the final O.K."

"Letzmler? Who's he? I thought you said I was ready to go." Lee knew he sounded a little petulant, but he was tired from all these examinations, and besides, his head hurt.

The doctor, Gorss, Lee thought his name was, was rather young but seemed used to this kind of thing. He turned on his tolerant smile again. "Dr. Letzmler is chief of the Familiarization and Post-Operative Adjustment Section. He can explain himself better when you see him."

"Is he the last one?" Lee asked. He was already following Dr. Gorss out the door and down a corridor.

Dr. Gorss stopped before a door marked "Dr. C. L. Letzmler," and opened it. "The last one. You take these," he handed Lee a thick manila folder, "and tell the girl Dr. Gorss sent you for your interview." He waited until Lee had entered, then closed the door and left.

\* \* \* \* \*

Evidently Dr. Letzmler had been expecting him, for very shortly Lee found himself sitting at the doctor's desk, comfortably seated in a

brown leather armchair. He was facing a rather pudgy man, who was leafing through the manila folder Lee had given him. Finally Dr. Letzmiller looked up.

"Well. Well now, Mr. Lee, suppose you first tell me about yourself, and then I'll tell you about me."

"Tell you about me?" Lee asked.

Dr. Letzmiller smiled. It was another tolerant smile, but it seemed more sincere than Gorss'. "I suppose the best way would be for me to review these facts on your medical history. You are Vincent Bonard Lee?"

"Yes, sir."

"Date of birth?"

"August 11, 1934."

"That would make you four hundred nine years old."

Lee hesitated. He never really thought of his age. It had long ago ceased to be of any importance to him. Of course he remembered his birth date. It was one of those facts that always appears on your records, like your social security number. He did some calculation in his head, as rapidly as the constantly shifting blank spots in his thinking would allow him.

"Yes, sir."

"It shows here that you first underwent replacive surgery in 1991. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Remember what it was for?"

"Yes, I had heart trouble. They fixed me up with one of those big jobs requiring my carrying batteries under my armpit."

"One of those early models. And this shows that at various times since then you have undergone replacive surgery some eighty-seven times, including three replacements of a pulmonary nature."

Again Lee hesitated. The number of times he had had a worn organ or tissue repaired or replaced was more than a little hazy. After the novelty of the first few times when he found himself with a new stomach, or liver, or muscle, he had started to take these things as a

matter of course. He gave a little nervous laugh. "If that paper says so, I suppose so, doctor."

"Yes. Well, everything seems to be functioning properly now, doesn't it? With the exception of your head, of course."

"Yes, yes I feel fine otherwise." Lee was feeling uncomfortable.

"Doctor, could you tell me what this is all about? I must have answered these questions half a dozen times before to those other people."

"In just a moment. First I need to know you a little better. Your medical history lists your occupation as 'cabinet maker'."

"That's right." Lee was becoming more and more uncomfortable. The extensive examinations had tired him, and repetition of the answers to all these questions was making him edgy.

"Doctor, can't you at least tell me what type operation I'm going to have?"

"What do you think it will be?"

"I don't know. Some sort of repair on my head, I guess."

"Mr. Lee, this isn't going to be a matter of repair. We have found it necessary to replace the entirety of what could roughly be called your 'brain', as well as part of the spinal cord."

"My whole brain?" Lee sat, stunned, comprehension slowly filtering into him. He voiced the only coherent thought which materialized. "Why that will mean there won't be anything left of me at all."

Dr. Letzmiller regarded him. "What do you mean?"

"Doc, you've got my records there. At one time or another, since they first put a new heart in me, every single inch of me has been replaced by an artificial part. I mean all of me. There's not one bit of me, heart, eyes, toenails, nothing, that is me. That bothered me quite a bit when this left eye was put in. I mean I thought, 'Well, this isn't me. This is my brain walking around in a jumble of artificial flesh.' I tell you it bothered me. But I went to a doctor, you know, a psychoanalyst, and he convinced me that as long as I had what he called a 'sense of identity', that I was me." Lee stopped. How could he explain it?

But Letzmiller seemed to understand. "And you think that your brain is all that is left of 'you'?"

"Doc, it's a funny feeling. Like this." Lee raised his hands, brought them together and touched his fingertips. "See that? I can raise those hands. I can make them touch each other. I can feel them touching each other. But it is just not quite right. It's just a little bit off key, like one trumpet player out of twenty being about one-sixteenth of a note flat. Know what I mean?"

"I think I do," said Letzmiller, nodding slowly. "Now, just what does that have to do with your operation?"

"Doctor--" Lee had to stop, for the patchwork quilt of blank spaces was dancing in his head. The helplessness went away, slowly, like smoke drifting from a fire. As his mind cleared, he realized that he didn't know why he was being interviewed by this doctor.

"Anything wrong?" Dr. Letzmiller asked.

Lee knew he wasn't being too coherent, jumping about with the conversation this way, but he asked the question, anyway. "Doc, why am I seeing you?"

"You haven't guessed?"

"No."

The doctor paused to light a half-gone cigar. "My job here at Merkins Replacive is to deal with just such fears as you have expressed. I'm an M.D. and a psychologist, and"--Letzmiller smiled to himself--"a kind of historian."

"Historian?"

"Well, you see I was supposed to give you the regular formal lecture on the history of replacive surgery when you first came in. Like to hear it?"

Lee nodded, so Letzmiller continued. "Replacive surgery is actually quite old. Old as medicine itself, I suppose. Very early attempts at dentures were tried, though with little success. And, of course, peg legs and hooks for persons who had lost their hands might be called replacive surgery, though they were very crude. Later on came more refined dentures, artificial limbs, corrective lenses, skull plates, hearing aids, plastic or cosmetic surgery, blood transfusions, all types of skin grafts, et cetera.

"The 1950s saw the beginning of bone and corneal transplants, use of plastics in arteries, those huge heart-lung and kidney machines, implantation of electrodes in the heart to steady its beat--many things which were mostly emergency or stop-gap measures. All through

the late 1900s refinements continued to be made, but it wasn't until 1988 that the fathers of replacive surgery, Doctors Mills, Levinson and McCarty made the breakthrough that revolutionized the whole concept. In very simplified language they unlocked the key to producing specialized living tissue through a bombardment of an extremely complex carbon compound with amino acids and electricity, then making it selective in function by a fantastically intricate application of radiation.

"That pulmonary replacement you received in 1991 was undoubtedly one of the first successes. You were quite lucky, you know. Up until 2017, only about five per cent of their synthesized hearts lasted more than thirty days. At any rate, the principle was established, and it was proven that it could work. Most of our work from then till a few years ago has been in improving and refining the work those three good doctors did over three hundred years ago."

Letzmillers cigar had gone out, and he discarded it in favor of a cigarette. "That would be the end of my history lecture, if it were not for the nature of your trouble."

Lee looked at him closely. "Why's that?"

"Well, Mr. Lee, the big thing missing in that summation is the seemingly impossible task of synthesizing nerve tissue, especially that of the cerebral cortex. It's been approximated, at any rate closely enough to give us good enough results to allow an artificial tissue to respond to brain signals about ninety-eight per cent as well as the original would. But actual duplication? No. At least not until about three years ago. To tell you the truth, it is barely out of the experimental stage."

"Experimental!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Yes, this will be the first complete replacement of a human brain. Oh, of course it has been done with animals, and it has been successful with partial replacements on humans. But you will have the honor of being the first human with a complete substitution."

Lee could not contain himself. "Doc, that's just it! There won't be a single atom of me except what you fellows have conjured up--"

Letzmillers broke in mildly. "I think 'conjured' is hardly the proper word, Mr. Lee."

"Well, of course, I didn't mean that. But don't you see what I'm driving at? You could just as well start from scratch and duplicate me



without bothering about going about it piecemeal. And what does that make me?"

The doctor had been looking at Lee intently, studying him through this outburst. "I think I see what you mean. And I can't answer you. The question you raise may be philosophical, or metaphysical, but it certainly isn't medical. And from a doctor's point of view complete substitution is the only course open, risky as it may seem."

Lee mulled this over. Of course he knew surgery was the only solution to his decaying mentality, actually the only alternative to his becoming a virtual idiot, and, shortly after that, dead. And he did not want to die. He had lived a long time, but thanks to the methods of Letzmilller, Gorss, and all their predecessors, he was as full of juice as he had been at thirty-five. But the question that kept plaguing him Letzmilller seemed determined to avoid. He didn't understand very much about replacive surgery, really didn't care to. If Letzmilller said it could work, then he wasn't worried about that. Well, he guessed he really didn't have much choice. With this realization, he had only one more question for Letzmilller.

"Doc, if I'm not me when this is over, do you think I'll know it?"

Letzmilller looked at Lee's troubled face. "Do you think that you would want to?"

Lee answered slowly. "No, no I guess not."

Letzmilller rose from his chair. "I'll talk to you again after the operation. Do you think you're ready to go to your room now?"

Lee nodded and obediently followed the doctor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee was asleep when the nurse came, but with the efficiency of all good nurses since time immemorial, she woke him to give him the sedative to prepare him for surgery. She chattered brightly as she prepared the hypodermic.

"You know, you have all the nurses speculating, Mr. Lee. I mean we're wondering just what Dr. Lakin, he's the anesthesiologist, is going to use for you when you won't have any brain for the anesthesia to work on." She stopped, the needle poised above Lee's arm, realizing the inaptness of her remark. "Oh. I shouldn't have said that."

"No, that's all right," said Lee. "I've already reconciled myself to being the headless horseman for a while." He had, too, although it was wonderfully strange to think of himself lying on the operating table

with a cavity where he right now thought, felt, knew that he was a person.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee didn't actually lie on the table in the literal sense. The table was inclined to about forty-five degrees, with his head exposed and supported by a clamp on the cheek and jaw bones. This arrangement was necessary to allow the waiting machinery access to the area where it would perform.

Physicians, surgeons, biologists and the like were gathered in the amphitheater to see a bit of medical history. Actually there wasn't much to see. A team of technicians, radiologists and surgeons were working around Lee. Some were attaching electrodes to parts of Lee's body to maintain the electrical impulses necessary to keep his vital processes in motion while the main switchboard was out of commission. Others were sensitizing the exposed brain, from which the skull had already been removed, to guide the delicate fingers of the huge automatic Operating, Recording and Calculating Complex through its precisely programmed steps.

Letzmilller was among those in the amphitheater, as a spectator, drawn both by professional curiosity and a desire to know the answer to Lee's question, "Doc, what will there be left of me?" Of course he couldn't find out even part of the answer for some weeks. Even the ORC complex, now being fitted to Lee's unconscious brain, adjusted and activated, would not finish with its job for something like thirty-two hours.

The synthesizer would reconvert the data, translate it into countless chemical and electrical formulae, and apply it to the raw material of carbons, amino acids, proteins, and other components. When the basic organ had been reconstructed, a process requiring another week and a half in the synthesizer, it would be grafted back. The nerve lead-ins would then be reconnected, one by one, spaced at intervals to avoid shock. Lee would be unconscious the whole time, of course. Or rather Lee would be unconscious part of the time. Most of the time he wouldn't have the capacity for either consciousness or the lack of it.

Dr. Letzmilller observed the huge ORC complex for a time, but there wasn't anything to see. It simply sat over Lee, doing its job. Unwanted, the thought came to Letzmilller that the machine looked like a frog with a long worm dangling from its mouth. Lee was the worm.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You can talk to him now, doctor." Oldenreid, Surgeon in Charge, addressed Letzmilller outside Lee's room where he had just finished his

examination. "Personally, I think things went exactly as they should. All physical and mental responses check out. I guess here's where I'm finished and you go to work."

Lee was sitting up in bed as Letzmilller entered. He looked just like he had in Letzmilller's office before the operation, except for the small white bandages around his head to protect his healing skull. "Well," the doctor said, "how do you feel? Your head hurt?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Letzmilller checked at Oldenreid's office, and was admitted to give his report, as had been planned.

"Well?" asked Oldenreid.

Letzmilller lit the end of his cigar before answering. "I wholly agree with you. Everything seems to have worked out exactly according to plan. I found him essentially the same as he appeared to me during his pre-operative interview. Of course he's a little foggy yet, but I suppose that's just the post-operative shock."

"Yes, that will clear up in a few days."

"He seems alert, responsive, full memory. I don't think there will be any difficulty with my part of his post-operative treatment. Except--

"Doctor, have you ever listened to a group of violins and sensed, just sensed, not actually heard, that one of them seemed about a quarter of a note flat?"

Oldenreid looked at him strangely as Letzmilller left the office and closed the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

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# The Floating Island of Madness

By Jason Kirby

Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from *Astounding Stories January 1933*.  
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*Far above the Arabian Desert three Secret Service men find  
an aerial island whose inhabitants are—madmen.*

Above us curved the pale, hot bowl of cloudless sky; below us stretched the rolling, tawny wastes of the great Arabian Desert; and away to the east, close to the dipping horizon, scudded the tiny speck we were following. We had been following it since dawn and it was now close to sunset. Where was it leading us? Should we go on or turn back? How much longer would our gas and oil hold out? And just where were we? I turned and saw my questions reflected in the eyes of my companions, Paul Foulet of the French Sureté and Douglas Brice of Scotland Yard.

"Too fast!" shouted Brice above the roar of our motors. I nodded. His gesture explained his meaning. The plane ahead had suddenly taken on a terrific, unbelievable speed. All day it had traveled normally, maintaining, but not increasing, the distance between us. But in the last fifteen minutes it had leaped into space. Fifteen minutes before it had been two miles in the lead; now it was barely visible. A tiny, vanishing speck. What could account for this burst of superhuman speed? Who was in that plane? \_What\_ was in that plane?

I glanced at Foulet. He shrugged non-committally, waving a courteous hand toward Brice. I understood; I agreed with him. This was Brice's party, and the decision was up to him. Foulet and I just happened to be along; it was partly design and partly coincidence.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days before I had been in Constantinople. I was disheartened and utterly disgusted. All the way from the home office of the United States Secret Service in Washington I had trailed my man, only to lose him. On steamships, by railway, airplane and motor we had traveled--always with my quarry just one tantalizing jump ahead of me--and in Constantinople I had lost him. And it was a ruse a child should have seen through. I could have beaten my head against a wall.

And then, suddenly, I had run into Foulet. Not ten days before I had talked to him in his office in Paris. I had told him a little of my errand, for I was working on the hunch that this man I was after concerned not only the United States, but France and the Continent as well. And what Foulet told me served only to strengthen my conviction. So, meeting him in Constantinople was a thin ray of light in my disgusted darkness. At least I could explode to a kindred spirit.

"Lost your man!" was his greeting. And it wasn't a question; it was a statement.

"How did you know?" I growled. My humiliation was too fresh to stand kidding.

"Constantinople," said Foulet amiably. "You always lose them in Constantinople. I've lost three here."

"Three?" I said, "Like mine!"

"Exactly," he nodded. Then he lowered his voice. "Come to my hotel. We can talk there."

"Now," he continued fifteen minutes later as we settled ourselves in his room, "you were very circumspect in Paris. You told me little--just a hint here and there. But it was enough. You--the United States--have joined our ranks--"

"You mean--"

"I mean that for a year we, the various secret service organizations of the Continent--and that includes, of course, Scotland Yard--have been after--Well, to be frank, we don't know what we're after. But we do know this. There is a power--there is someone, somewhere, who is trying to conquer the world."

[Illustration: \_A white speck took shape beneath the rising Island.\_]

"Are you serious?" I glanced at him but the tight lines of his set mouth convinced me. "I beg your pardon," I murmured. "Go ahead."

"I don't blame you for thinking it was a jest," he said imperturbably, "But, to prove I know what I'm talking about, let me tell you what this man has done whom you have been pursuing. He has done one of two things. Either he has proved himself a dangerous revolutionary or he has engineered the failure of a bank or chain of banks--"

"We can't prove it," I interrupted.

"No," said Foulet, "Neither can we. Neither can Scotland Yard--or the

secret services of Belgium or Germany or Italy or Spain. But there you are--"

"You mean that in all these countries--?"

"I mean that for a year--probably longer--these countries have been and are being steadily, and systematically, undermined. The morale of the people is being weakened; their faith in their government is being betrayed--and someone is behind it. Someone who can think faster and plan more carefully than we--someone whose agents we always lose in Constantinople! I'll wager you lost your man from a roof-top."

I nodded, my disgust at my own stupidity returning in full force. "There was a lower roof and a maze of crisscross alleys," I muttered. "He got away."

"Was there an airplane anywhere around?" asked Foulet.

I glanced at him in surprise. What good would an airplane have been on a roof-top ten feet wide by twelve feet long? Then I remembered. "There was an airplane," I said, "but it was a long way off, and I could scarcely see it; but the air was very still and I heard the motor."

Foulet nodded, "And if you had had a pair of glasses," he said gently, "You would have seen that the airplane had a glider attached to it. There is always an airplane--and a glider--when we lose our men from the roofs of Constantinople."

"But that must be coincidence!" I insisted. "Why, I was on that roof right on the fellow's heels--and the airplane was at least five miles away!"

Foulet shrugged, "Coincidence--possibly," he said, "but it is our only clue."

"Of course," I murmured thoughtfully, "you have never been able to follow--"

Foulet smiled, "Can you imagine where that airplane would be by the time we climbed down off our roofs and got to a flying field and started in pursuit?"

\* \* \* \* \*

We descended for dinner. Foulet's story had restored my self-confidence somewhat--but I was still sore. Of course Foulet connecting my vanishing man with that disappearing airplane was absurd--but where had the man gone? Was my supposition that he had

jumped to a lower roof, climbed a wall and run through the maze of alleyways in half a minute in any way less absurd?

We were halfway through dinner when Brice appeared. Brice was one of the best men in Scotland Yard and I had known him many years. So, evidently, had Foulet, for his eyes flickered faintly with pleased surprise at the sight of him. Brice came directly to our table. He was bursting with victorious joy. I could feel it somehow, although his face, carefully schooled to betray no emotion, was placid and casual.

All through the remainder of the meal I could feel the vibrations of his excitement. But it was only at the very end that he confided anything--and his confidence only served to make the excitement and sense of impending thrill greater.

Just as he was rising to leave he shoved a tiny strip of paper across the table to me with a sidelong glance at Foulet. "Another roof-top," I read scrawled in pencil. "If you like, meet me at the flying field before dawn." If I liked! I shoved the paper across to Foulet who read it and carelessly twisted it into a spill to light his cigar. But his hand shook ever so slightly.

Needless to say we went to the flying field shortly after midnight. Bruce was there, pacing up and down restlessly. Near him was a huge tri-motored biplane, its motor humming in readiness.

"I've put a man on the trail in my place," Brice told us briefly. "Somebody else is going to lose the scent on a roof-top--and I'm going to watch."

\* \* \* \* \*

We settled to our wait. To me it seemed absurdly hopeless. The flying field was on a slight rise. Below us spread the dark shadow that was Constantinople. There was no moon to give it form and substance--it was just a lake of deeper darkness, a spreading mass of silent roof-tops and minarets. How did Brice expect to see his quarry escape? Suppose he fled during the night? And even with daylight--

The first streaks of dawn found us still waiting, our ears strained for the hum of an airplane motor. But hardly had the golden rim of the sun appeared over the horizon when it came. It came from the east--straight out of the golden glory of the sun. Nearer and nearer it came; an airplane--alone.

"It hasn't got the glider," muttered Foulet and his tone was tinged with disappointment. But hardly had he spoken when, from one of the myriad roof-tops below us, rose a swift streak of shadow. So fast it flew, with such unbelievable speed, that to our eyes it was little

more than a blur; but--

"The glider!" Brice gasped. "My God! How did he do it?" We stared, silent with amazement. The airplane, that only a second before had flown alone, now was towing a glider--a glider that had arisen, as if by magic, from the housetops!

Another instant and we had piled into the cockpit of the tri-motored plane and were off on our pursuit. That pursuit that led us on and on till, as the sun sank behind us, we found ourselves above the illimitable, tawny wastes of the great Arabian Desert.

And now--what? All day long, as I have said, the plane we were pursuing had maintained, but never increased, the distance between us. Each hour had brought us renewed hope that the next hour would bring capture--or at least some definite clue, some shred of information. But the plane, still towing its glider, had gone on and on, steadily, imperturbably. And we dared not open fire and attempt to bring it down for fear of destroying our one meager chance of following it to its destination.

\* \* \* \* \*

And now it had vanished. Suddenly, unaccountably it had taken on that terrific burst of speed which I have described. In ten minutes it had become a speck on the far horizon--in another instant it was gone. We were alone. Night was falling. If we turned back our gas might bring us to safety. If we went on--what?

I turned to my companions. Foulet still maintained his non-committal attitude, but Brice was deeply disappointed and worried. His ruddy English face was knotted in a scowl and his blue eyes were dark. Quickly he jerked his head back. We understood. Of course, turning back was the only thing to do; to go on was absurd. Our quarry had totally disappeared. But it was heart-breaking. Once again we had been fooled and outwitted. Our disappointment filled that tiny cockpit like a tangible mist. Brice threw over the stick with a gesture of disgust. In response our right wing lifted a bit, seemed to shake itself, then settled--and the plane continued on its course. Brice's eyes flickered with surprise. He shoved the stick back, threw it over again, but toward the opposite side. Obediently our left wing lifted as if to bank, a shudder passed through it, it dropped, the plane leveled, and went on.

Foulet leaned forward, his eyes were gleaming, his face flushed and eager. "Climb!" he yelled above the roar of the motors. "Up!" Brice nodded--but it was no use. That plane was like a live thing; nothing we could do would swerve it from its course. We stared at one another. Were we mad? Were we under a hypnotic spell? But our minds were clear,



and the idea of hypnosis was absurd, for we had tried to turn back. It was the machine that refused to obey.

Again Foulet leaned forward. "Drop!" he shouted. Brice nodded, but the plane refused to respond. On and on, straight as a die, it sped.

"Try slowing the motor," I yelled into Brice's ear and both Foulet and I leaned forward to watch results.

The motors slowed. Gradually the roaring, pounding hum lessened, and our speed continued! The whine of the wind in the wires abated not one whit! The speedometer on our instrument board climbed!

Brice turned. His face, in the deepening dusk, was a blur of pasty white. His hands hung at his sides. The motors purred, pulsed, were silent. The plane, unaided, unguided, flew alone!

\* \* \* \* \*

We sat hushed and unbelieving in that terrible, deathlike silence. Our ears, attuned all day to the deafening roar of the motors, felt as if they would burst in the sudden, agonizing stillness. There was not a sound save the whine of the wind in the wires as the plane sped on. Above us curved the illimitable arch of darkening sky. Below us lay the empty stretch of blank desert.

We didn't speak. I know that I, for one, could not bring my voice to break that ominous stillness. Silently we sat there, watching, waiting.... The quick darkness of the desert fell like a velvet curtain. The stars burst forth as if lit by an invisible hand. Foulet stirred, leaned forward, gasped. My eyes followed his gaze. Before our plane spread a path of light, dull, ruddily glowing, like the ghost of live embers. It cut the darkness of the night like a flaming finger--and along it we sped as if on an invisible track!

"The speed of that other plane," muttered Brice, breaking that utter silence, "This was it!"

Foulet and I nodded. Well could I imagine that we were travelling at that same terrific, impossible speed. And we were helpless--helpless in the clutch of--what? What power lay behind this band of light that drew us irresistibly toward it?

The ruddy pathway brightened. The light grew stronger. Our speed increased. The whine of the wires was tuned almost past human hearing. The plane trembled like a live thing in the grip of inhuman forces. A great glowing eye suddenly burst from the rim of the horizon--the source of the light! Instinctively I closed my eyes. What power might that eye possess? The same thought must have struck Brice and Foulet

for they ducked to the floor of the cockpit, pulling me with them.

"Take care!" Brice muttered, "It might blind us."

We sat huddled in that cockpit for what seemed an eternity, though it couldn't have been more than two minutes. The glare increased. It threw into sharp, uncanny relief every tiny detail of the cockpit and of our faces. The light was as powerful as a searchlight, but not so blinding. It had a rosy, diffused quality that the searchlight lacks.

\* \* \* \* \*

In that eternity of tense waiting I tried to collect my thoughts. I told myself that I must keep steady, that I must keep my mind clear. I struggled to get a grip on myself; the light, the steady flying without power, the boundless, horrible silence had shaken me. But there was more to come. I knew it. We all knew it. And it was not physical strength that would pull us through--it was wits. We must hold steady. Thank God we all had years of training--war experience, peace experience, countless life-and-death adventures--behind us. It would all count now. It would all help us to keep our brains clear and cool. Wits, I thought again, only our wits would stand between us and--what?

The ground wheels of the plane struck something solid; rolled; stopped! The light snapped off. The sudden blackness, falling like a blanket of thick fur, choked me. In that first dazed, gasping instant I was conscious of only one thing. The plane was no longer in motion. But we had not dropped; of that I was sure. We were still, as we had been, close to two thousand feet above the earth!

Then came the sound of running feet and a confused blur of voices. The door of the cockpit was thrown open. A man leaned in, his hand on the jamb.

"Inspector Brice," he said quietly. "Monsieur Foulet. Lieutenant Ainslee. We are glad to welcome you." His words were courteous, but something in his tone sent a tingling chill down my spine. It was cold, as soulless as the clink of metal. It was dull, without life or inflection. But there was something else--something I could not name.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was nearest the door and scrambled out first. To my surprise it was not dark. We were enveloped by a radiance, rosy as the broad ray had been, but fainter, like the afterglow of a sunset. By this light I could make out, vaguely, our surroundings. We seemed to be on a plateau; a great flat space probably an acre in extent, surrounded by a six-foot wall. Behind us there was a wide gateway through which our

airplane had just come and across which workmen were dropping bars made of some material like cement. Before us, dotting this acre or so of plateau, were small, domed structures made of the same cement-like material. In the center of the plateau rose a larger domed building with a segment of its roof open to the stars and through this opening I could see the shadowy suggestion of a great lamp. There was the source of that powerful magnetic ray!

Foulet and Brice scrambled out and stood beside me. They said never a word, but I knew that every sense was alert.

"If you will follow me," that same cold, expressionless voice murmured. I turned to look at the man. He was not bad looking, clean shaven, well tailored. He swung his eyes to meet my gaze and as he did so that same chill fled along my spine. His eyes--what was the matter with them? They were dark--brown or black--and as shiny as shoe buttons. But there was no gleam of expression in them. Their shine was the glitter of polished glass.

Without a word we followed him across the small cleared space where our airplane stood, past a row of the small, domed structures to a low door cut in the white wall of the great central building. At the doorway he turned.

"I am taking you to the Master," he said; then, over his shoulder he added. "There is no means of escape--we are two thousand feet above the earth!" And he laughed--a quick, short cackle of crazy laughter. I felt the breath catch in my throat and the short hairs prickle at my neck. Foulet gripped my arm. Through my coat I could feel the chill of his fingers, but his grasp steadied me.

We walked on, following our guide. Down a narrow passageway, through a low arched door into a small room, evidently an ante-chamber to a larger room beyond. Without a word our guide left us, passing through another door which he closed after him.

Brice and Foulet and I exchanged looks, but we were silent. It might be we were watched. It might be that the very walls had ears. We could trust nothing.

Our guide returned. "The Master," he said and flung open a wide door.

\* \* \* \* \*

We found ourselves in a large room filled with paraphernalia of all sorts: wires, lights, laboratory tables cluttered with test tubes and apparatus--and in the midst of this ordered chaos stood a man, his gleaming eyes watching us fixedly.

At first I was conscious of nothing but his eyes. Large, coal black and shiny with that peculiar, expressionless gloss I had noted in the eyes of our guide. Later I realized that he was of slight build, meticulously neat, with a tiny black waxed mustache and a carefully trimmed Van Dyke beard.

"Welcome to my floating island," he said gravely, never swerving those shiny eyes for an instant. "We have hoped long for your coming." He paused, noiselessly rubbing his hands, and watching us. We stared back, fascinated by that glossy, fixed gaze. "There is much to tell you," he went on, "and to ask you." He permitted himself a slow smile that spread his lips but failed to reach his eyes. "During your stay here," he continued, "which I hope will be both long and profitable, you will become my slaves and will know me as Master. But before you come under my domination you may know my name."

For the first time he moved his eyes. His glance swept the room as if to assure himself we were alone. He stepped, as swiftly and softly as a cat, over to the door through which we had entered, opened it, spoke to our guide who was waiting in the ante-room, closed it and returned. He faced us, his lips smiling and his eyes as blank as polished agate.

"My name," he said softly, "is Algernon--Frederick--Fraser!" He paused and watched us. Behind me I felt Foulet start; I heard Brice's quickly suppressed gasp. My own throat closed on words that might have been fatal. Algernon Frederick Fraser! Was it possible? Could it be?

Five years before Fraser had suddenly burst on the world of science. He had made some amazing discoveries regarding the power of light; discoveries that would reorganize the living conditions of the world. For a week or two the papers were filled with the man's amazing genius; then no more was heard of him. Had he died? What was the story?

\* \* \* \* \*

Two years passed and even the name of Fraser was forgotten. Then suddenly it burst forth again in the headlines of the world. Fraser had disappeared! Fraser had vanished! But not as a brilliant genius of science; he had gone as an escaped lunatic! After his amazing burst of fame his mind snapped. Somehow the story had been kept out of the press.

Fraser was incarcerated in a quiet, very private asylum, and that was all. All--until he escaped. When that happened the story couldn't be hushed any longer. The press was informed, the people were warned. He became known as the Mad Menace. The police and secret service organizations of the world searched for him. His name became a byword. Where had he gone? What would he do? What was his scheme? For he was

still the astounding scientific genius. That portion of his mind was untouched. At the time of his escape the physicians in charge of the case assured the press that Fraser's scientific mind was every bit as sound as ever.

And that was all. Aside from his god Science he was a maniac--inhuman, cruel, unreasoning. What would such a man do loosed in the world? What might he not do? Was it possible that it was this man who stood before us now with his eyes fastened upon us so intently and his lips spread in that little, empty smile? Suddenly I knew! Those eyes! Those eyes were the shiny, vacuous, soulless eyes of a madman!

"I see," he said softly, "that you have heard of me. But it is three years since your world has seen me--yes?" He laughed--a low laugh that seemed to freeze the air around him. "They call me mad." His smile faded, his eyes bored through us like steel needles. "I am not mad! No madman could do what I have done in three years!" For the first time an expression flickered in his eyes--a crafty gleam of vanity that flared instantaneously. "Would you like to see?" He leaned toward us. We bowed, but it was Brice who spoke.

"Very much, Doctor Fraser--"

"Don't call me that!" The man whirled like a tiger ready to spring. "Don't call me that! I am Master here! Call me Master! Say it." His voice rose to a shriek. "Say it--Master!"

\* \* \* \*

I clamped my teeth against the bloodless horror of that maniacal voice. It chilled my veins. Again I felt the hair rise on my scalp. Brice bowed quietly; and his eyes, serene and blue, met Fraser's fairly.

"Of course, Master." His low English voice soothed the bristling silence. "I am sure I speak for Monsieur Foulet and Lieutenant Ainslee when I say that we would be most deeply interested in your achievements."

Fraser was placated. He relaxed. He softly rubbed his hands while a smug, crafty smile flitted across his lips. "You will follow me," he murmured.

He led the way back through the ante-room and down the passageway till we stood again under the stars, and again I was struck by the strange light, warm and faint and rosy like a sunset afterglow. As if he read my thought Fraser turned to me.

"I will show you first the source of this rosy light; that, I believe,

will explain a great deal." He led the way down one of the narrow pathways between the low, domed houses--if they could be called houses, for they were little larger than kennels. At the six-foot wall that surrounded this plateau he paused. "Would you like to look over the wall?" he asked.

For the space of a breath we hesitated. Was this a trap? Through my mind flashed the words of the man who had guided us to Fraser. "You are two thousand feet above the earth," he had said. Was that true? And if it were, might not Fraser push us over the wall? But instantly logic came to my rescue. Fraser had brought us here, and he could have brought us for but one thing: to question us. Would he be apt to do us harm before those questions were asked? And besides, would Fraser's brilliantly subtle mind stoop so low as to destroy enemies by pushing them over a wall?

"Thank you," we murmured simultaneously. "This whole achievement is of tremendous interest to us," Foulet added.

Fraser chuckled. "It will be of greater interest--later," he said, and his blank, glittering eyes rested on first one of us, then another with a cold, satisfied gleam. Then he lifted his hand and opened a square door in the wall about the size of a port-hole. To my surprise the little door swung back as lightly as a feather and made scarcely a sound as it slammed against the wall itself. Again Fraser answered my unspoken thought.

"It has only substance," he said with his vain smirk. "No weight whatever. This entire platform together with its huts is lighter than air. If I should tear loose this little door it would float out of my hands instantly and go straight up to the stars. The substance--I have called it Fleotite--is not only lighter than air but lighter than ether."

"But we are not floating," said Brice; "we are stationary. Is the lightness of your Fleotite counteracted by the weight of the men and machines?"

Fraser shook his head. "Not entirely," he said. "But first look through this little window. Then I will explain."

\* \* \* \* \*

Eagerly we pressed forward. Our danger was almost forgotten in our interest. This was amazing--stupendous! Together, shoulder to shoulder, we gazed through the aperture. We were suspended in space! Above us shone the blue-black Arabian night, and beneath us--far, far beneath--lay the sands of the desert looking rosy and warm in that same dull red glare of light that, to a fainter degree, gave us the

effect of afterglow. But we were not floating; we were anchored as securely as a ship riding in a calm harbor.

We turned back to Fraser, amazed, awed, bursting with questions. Madman he might be, but he had wrought a miracle.

"I will explain," he said and his eyes gleamed with pride. "Of course you know of my tremendous discoveries connected with the power of light. At any rate, five years ago, the scientific world on earth thought they were tremendous. In reality that was nothing to my amazing strides in the past three years. There is nothing that cannot be done with light! Nothing!" For the first time Fraser's eyes became alive. They were illumined. His whole body seemed to radiate light and fire and genius. We listened, fascinated.

"Take, for instance," he continued eagerly, "that ray with which I drew you and your plane to me. That ray is the pure power of magnetism. At full strength it will draw anything to it instantly. Fortunately the power can be regulated: I can switch a lever in my laboratory and draw things to me, via the ray, at any speed I wish--one hundred, two hundred, a thousand miles an hour."

\* \* \* \* \*

"How far can you throw the ray?" asked Foulet, and I knew he was thinking of that glider that rose from the roof-tops of Constantinople. Fraser also knew he was thinking of that.

"I did not draw the glider," he said quietly. "The airplane I sent did that. My airplanes carry batteries of this ray. In the beginning I found gliders to be more practical for my purposes than airplanes. For one thing they were silent. My only problem was that of getting them off the ground. Once they were in the air I could manage everything. It was this problem that inspired this discovery and perfection of the ray. But, you asked how far I can throw the ray? This main lamp, that I operate myself from here, is effective at two hundred miles. At one hundred miles it enjoys its full power."

"And you can draw anything to you," asked Brice, "within the radius of the magnetic ray?"

"Anything in the air," answered Fraser. "But of course I must use caution. Great caution. If I drew planes to me indiscriminately I would draw attention to myself; my secret and my location here would leak out. No. That must not be. So the only planes I bring are my own--and yours." He paused and his black eyes, again glassy, swept over us. "It is a compliment I pay you," he said finally. "You have become too troublesome. You know too much. Sooner or later the time would come when you would combine your forces. That would be a

nuisance. So I decided to bring you here."

"Suppose," asked Foulet curiously, "we hadn't fallen into your trap? Suppose we had turned back before reaching the point where your ray is effective?"

Fraser shook his head and that smug, offensive smile appeared again. "You were trapped from the beginning, though you didn't know it," he said. "The plane you were following was equipped with batteries of the ray which, while not as powerful as the lamp I have here, were still powerful enough to hold you to the course we choose you to run. But enough of the ray," he added impatiently. "There are one or two other things I want to explain and then--" he paused and the pause, somehow, was alive with menace. What was he going to do after he had finished treating us as honored guests? For the third time he answered my unspoken question. His eyes narrowed till they were black, glittering slits. His voice, as he leaned toward us, was no more than a hissing whisper.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Slaves!" he said, and his lips twisted. "How will you like to be slaves of Mad Algy Fraser?" He laughed--a chuckle that started in his throat and rose and rose till it seemed to shatter my ear-drums. I felt my teeth grinding together and my nails bit my palms in my effort to control my nerves against the strain of that maniacal glee. Suddenly he sobered. His laugh died instantly like a radio that had been snapped off. "Listen and I will tell you. I will tell you everything because it is necessary for you to know so that you may work for me intelligently and you will remember better and be of greater use to me if I tell you now while you are yet--sane!"

"Sane!" The exclamation sprang from the three of us simultaneously. I felt a cold chill start between my shoulder blades. For an instant my breath choked in my throat. My heart paused--and then raced. What did he mean? What was he going to do to us? What scheme had he evolved in his crazed brain?

"I have perfected a serum"--his tone was professional, cold; he might have been talking to a class in a lecture room--"a serum that robs the patient of every vestige of human emotion--and therefore sanity. All his intellect, his memories, however, remain, to serve him in carrying out my orders. He loses all his will to live and resist, and becomes nothing but an automaton, whose complete mental equipment is at my command."

There was silence. His glassy black eyes, blank and soulless, swept over us. His mouth curled in that smug, complacent smile. He had us with our shoulders to the floor. He knew it--and he knew we knew it.



There was no possible way we could escape. We were two thousand feet above the earth. Our plane wouldn't get a quarter of a mile before the magnetic ray would bring it back. Parachute? Even supposing we could get parachutes where would we go? Drop two thousand feet into the middle of the Arabian Desert?

My brain raced. Never before had I been in such a tight place. And soon--if Fraser had his way--I wouldn't even have a mind to think with! I felt choked, stifled. Was there no way out? It seemed to me that a blanket--a soft, terrible blanket of uncontrollable circumstance--was being folded around me, robbing me of the use of my limbs, paralyzing me, numbing me. And out of this terrible helplessness came again Fraser's voice.

"I have told you enough," he said suavely, "so that you may have a faint idea of my power. I will send you now to Doctor Semple who will administer the serum and place you under the 'nourishment ray.' This is another of my discoveries," he added casually. "It is a ray which allows the patient to absorb, through the shell of the skin, sufficient nourishment, both solid and liquid, to last for twenty-four hours."

\* \* \* \* \*

Five minutes later we stood in a small room that might have been the office of an up-to-date physician anywhere in the world. Across the polished top of a mahogany desk Dr. Semple stared at us, his eyes, like the eyes of our guide and Fraser, polished and expressionless. But now we understood. Those eyes were expressionless because there was nothing to give them expression. I tried to force my mind to comprehend the almost incomprehensible. We were among men who were not men! We were fast in the power of human beings who possessed no trace of humanity, who had become nothing but scientific Robots even though they still had bodies of flesh and blood! It was unbelievable! My hands grew cold and my brain hot at the thought. Yet, gazing into the bright, enamelled eyes of Dr. Semple, I knew it was true.

Carefully, scientifically, we were prepared for our injections. And with every mechanical move of the doctor my mind seemed to take on fresh speed as it raced toward some solution to our terrible problem. My eyes flew around the tiny office searching for some means of escape. Doctor Semple turned to prepare the syringe. Behind his back Brice gestured frantically. Somehow I understood. In my pocket was a flask--a flask I had filled with drinking water in Constantinople. Bewildered, I handed it over to him.

The doctor turned, swabbed a patch of iodine on our arms, reached for the syringe. As he leaned over, Foulet thrust forward a foot. The doctor tripped, sprawled full length on the floor. Foulet and I

quickly stooped to pick him up, standing between him and Brice--shielding his eyes so that he could not see. We fumbled to give Brice time. We apologized and soothed. Out of the tail of my eye I could see Brice working like lightning--emptying out the syringe of that villainous liquid, filling it with clear water.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was done! We raised the doctor to his feet; gave his clothes a final brush. But as we stood back I know my hands were trembling and I had to clamp my teeth to keep them from chattering. Were we out of danger yet? Would the doctor discover our ruse? And, if we got out of his office without receiving the terrible injection, could we successfully fool Fraser and his "slaves" into believing we were mad? Fool them until we got a chance to escape? Could we simulate that glassy stare? Were we sufficiently good actors to get away with it? The questions pounded and raced through my brain in that instant when Doctor Semple turned again to his desk and picked up the syringe.

But the miracle happened! Mechanically he gave us the injection--never suspecting that it was not the devilish liquid he had put in, but only clear water! Then he stepped back and watched us. Cold chills raced up and down my spine. What were we supposed to do now? What was the action of the serum? Did it act at once or slowly? Was it supposed to make us sick? Did it send us to sleep? How could we simulate symptoms when we had no idea what these symptoms were supposed to be? But the cold voice of the doctor cut sharply across my agonized questions.

"You will lie down here," he said, opening a door into a room whose trails were lined with bunks, like an opium den. "In half an hour I will come for you. By that time--" His lips spread in that same travesty of a smile Fraser had employed.

We filed into the room and the door closed behind us. Obediently we lay down on the narrow bunks. We dared not speak. We scarcely dared glance at each other. We must act, at all times, as if we were observed. Might not Fraser have a ray that could penetrate walls? Might he not, even now, know that we had outwitted the doctor and had not received the fatal injection? And what then? Suppose Fraser himself superintended another injection? I pulled my thoughts back from the terrible supposition. One thing at a time. So far all had gone well. I lay down on the bunk and closed my eyes.

Half an hour later we heard the door open. Now, I, thought, when I look up, I am supposed to be mad! I struggled to make my mind a blank. I tried to force into my eyes that peculiar, brilliant, shiny, vacant expression I had noticed. Would I succeed?

\* \* \* \* \*

I raised my eyes. The doctor was standing before us. With a gesture he bade Foulet go to him. I watched beneath lowered lids. Thank God he had called Foulet first. Foulet had dabbled in the psychology of insanity. Foulet would know how to act, and I would ape him. Coldly, mechanically Doctor Semple ran him through a few tests. I watched with bated breath. The doctor nodded. Foulet had passed!

It was my turn. I did exactly as Foulet had done--and succeeded! I had to turn away swiftly so that the doctor wouldn't see the gleam of triumph in my supposedly mad eyes.

He motioned to Brice. But just as Brice stepped forward the door opened and Fraser came into the room. For an instant everything reeled. We were gone! But even in that terrible instant of despair I remembered to keep my eyes blank. No trace of expression must appear or we were lost. I stretched my lips in that travesty of a smile I had seen the others use. Fraser stared at us, one after the other. He nodded.

"It is well," he said slowly and distinctly as if he were talking to small children. "Your names will still be as they were." We stared at him blankly and again he nodded. "You have forgotten your names--ah! Yours," he pointed to me, "was Ainslee, and it still is. And you are Monsieur Foulet. But Brice--" he paused. My heart hung in my breast, suspended there with terror. What was the matter with Brice? What did Fraser suspect--or know? He turned to the doctor. "You will give Inspector Brice another injection," he said. "The Inspector has a strong mind, and a clever one. A normal injection would not be enough."

It seemed to me that my blood froze. In that terrible instant it ran, like tingling ice, through my veins. Brice! The brainiest man in Scotland Yard! For Fraser was right. Brice had more brains than Foulet and I together. And in another half hour Brice would be no better than an idiot! For I didn't fool myself. Even Brice couldn't outwit Doctor Semple twice.

"You will follow me," said Fraser, turning to Foulet and me. "I will put you under the nourishment ray while Doctor Semple attends to Brice." Obediently, with slightly shuffling, gait and vacant eyes we followed him into an adjoining room, leaving Brice behind. I didn't even trust myself to glance at him as we left. But my heart was in my boots. When would we see him again? And what would he be?

\* \* \* \* \*

The room we entered was dark, but instantly Fraser switched on a mellow, orange-colored light, that flooded the room with a deep, warm

glow.

"Strip yourselves and sit down," he said, pointing to deep lounging chairs that filled the room. "You will do nothing. Relax and allow the light to bathe you. In half an hour I will come back with instructions."

We obeyed, I imitating blindly every vague, mechanical movement of Foulet's. We settled ourselves in the comfortable chairs and Fraser left us. He had told us to relax--but to do anything else would have been impossible. The light soothed us, eased us; gave us, somehow, a penetrating sensation of peace and complete comfort. It flowed around us, warming us, lulling us to a delicious dreamy state that was neither waking nor sleeping. It wiped out danger; it wiped out Time; nothing existed but this warm and relaxing sense of utter satisfaction and peace.

Through this mist of contentment came Fraser's voice, "That is all!" The light faded gradually, and as gradually we came to ourselves. "You will dress," directed Fraser in the same clear, clipped manner, "and you will come to me in my laboratory."

Fifteen minutes later we stood before him, vacant-eyed and solemn. Fraser fastened his black, polished eyes upon us. "You will tell me," he said distinctly, "all you know."

We were silent. How could we tell him all we knew when we were supposed to have forgotten everything? Was this a trap? Or did our inside secret service information come under the general head of Science? But before these questions had actually formed in my mind I remembered that several times Fraser had answered my questions before they were asked. Might he be a mind reader? Best to take no chances! I made my conscious mind as blank as possible and gazed back at him. At my side Foulet made a vague and uncertain noise in his throat.

"Your countries are afraid of me?" Fraser leaned forward, that smug, vain smile curling his lips. "Your countries know there is a power abroad stronger than they? They feel that between the twin horns of economic pressure and the red menace they will be tossed to destruction?"

"Destruction?" repeated Foulet with all the vacant inflection of idiocy.

"Tossed?" I asked imitating Foulet. But instantly I wondered if we were taking the right tack for Fraser's eyes grew red with fury.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Answer me!" he raged. "Tell me that your countries know that soon I shall be master of the world! Tell me they are afraid of me! Tell me that in the last three years I have slowly gained control of commerce, of gold! Tell me that they know I hold the economic systems of the world in the hollow of my hand! Tell me that not a government on earth but knows it is hanging on the brink of disaster! And I--I put it there! My agents spread the propaganda of ruin! My agents crashed your Wall Street and broke your banks! I! I! I! Mad Algy Fraser!" He stopped, gasping for breath. His face was scarlet. His eyes glowed like red coals. Suddenly he burst into a cascade of maniacal laughter, high, insane, terrible.

It took all my control to keep my eyes blank, my face devoid of expression. Out of the tail of my eye I saw Foulet smiling, a vague, idiotic smile of sympathy with Fraser's glee. But suddenly the glee died--as suddenly as if a button had snapped off the current. He leaned forward, his black eyes devouring our faces.

"They are afraid of me?" It was a whisper, sharply eager. "The world knows I am Master?"

"Master," repeated Foulet. It wasn't quite a question, yet neither was it sufficiently definite as an answer to arouse Fraser's suspicions. To my relief it satisfied him. The congested blood drained out of his face. His eyes lost their glare. He turned and for several minutes tramped up and down the laboratory lost in thought. At last he came back to us.

"I have changed my mind," he muttered. "Come with me."

Without a word we followed him, out through the door and down the passageway. Out of the building he led us. The air was stirring with the first breath of dawn and along the horizon glowed a band of pure gold where the sun would soon rise. When he had walked some thirty yards from the laboratory Fraser paused. With his toe he touched a spring in the platform. A trap door instantly yawned at our feet. I suppressed a start just in time, but through my body shot a thrill of fear. My muscles tensed. My heart raced. What now? Where could a trap door, two thousand feet above the earth lead? Was he going to shove us into space because we refused to answer his questions?

"Go down," Fraser ordered.

\* \* \* \* \*

For the space of a breath we hesitated. To disobey meant certain and instant death at the hands of this soulless maniac. But to obey--to drop through this trap-door--also meant death. I took a step forward. Could we overpower him? But what if we did? There were others here

beside Fraser. How many others I had no idea, but surely enough to make things impossible for Foulet and me. Yet we dared not even hesitate. To hesitate implied thinking--and a man robbed of his brain cannot think! There was no way out. Together Foulet and I stepped to the brink of the yawning hole....

For an instant we were almost blinded by a glare of rosy light that seemed to burst upon us from the earth so far below. Here was the source of that strange afterglow! Away beneath us, evidently on the sands of the Arabian desert, glowed four red eyes sending forth the rosy rays that converged at the center of the floating platform. Instantly I comprehended Fraser's scheme. The Fleotite he had invented, and of which the platform and buildings were made, was lighter than air. It followed, therefore, that if it were not anchored in some way it would instantly rise. So Fraser had anchored it with four of his magnetic rays! He had told us that he could regulate the pulling power of the ray, so what he had obviously done was to calculate to a nicety the lift of the Fleotite against the magnetism of the rays.

But instantaneously with this thought came another. Fraser was urging us into the glow of the magnetic ray! If once our bodies came entirely within the ray we would be yanked from the platform and dashed to death--sucked to destruction on the sands below.

In my ear I heard Fraser's fiendish chuckle. "The instinct of fear still holds, eh? My serum can destroy your conscious mind--but not your native fear? Cowards! Fools! But I am not going to push you off. Look!" With his foot he pressed another lever which, while it did not shut off any of the light, seemed to deflect the ray. "Fools!" he said again scornfully. "Go down!"

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Then it was I saw where he was sending us! Thirty feet below the platform there swung a small cabin, attached by cables and reached by a swinging steel ladder. As I looked a door in the roof slid back. "Climb down!" ordered Fraser again. There was nothing to do but obey. Accustomed as I was to flying, inured as I had become to great heights, my head reeled and my hands grew icy as I swung myself through that trap door and felt for a footing on the swinging ladder. Suppose Fraser turned the ray back on us as we climbed down? Suppose he cut the ladder? But instantly my good sense told me he would do neither. If he had meant to kill us he could have done it easier than this. No, somewhere in his mad head, he had a reason for sending us down to this swinging cabin.

Five minutes later Foulet and I stared at each other in the cramped confines of our prison. The tiny door in the roof, through which we

had dropped, was closed. The steel ladder had been pulled up. We were alone. Alone? Were there no eyes that watched us still, or ears that listened to what we might say? Foulet evidently shared my sense of espionage, for, without even a glance at me, he lay down on the hard floor of our bare little cabin and, to all intents and purposes, fell asleep.

For a few minutes I stood staring at him, then followed his example. As I relaxed I realized I was tremendously weary. The cumulative exhaustion of the past thirty-six hours seemed to crowd upon me with a smothering sense of physical oppression. I looked at my watch and wound it. Five o'clock. Through the narrow slits near the roof of our swinging cell I could see the changing light of dawn, melting in with the rosy glow from the magnetic rays. My eyelids drooped heavily....

When I awoke Foulet was standing near me, his arms folded across his chest, scowling thoughtfully. He nodded as he saw my open eyes, but when I started to speak he shook his head sharply. With his gesture there flooded back to me the feeling that we were watched--even through the walls of our aerial prison and the floor of the platform above us.

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I sat up and, clasping my knees with my hands, leaned against the wall. There must be a way out of this for us! All my life I had worked on the theory that if you thought hard enough there was a way out of any difficulty. But this seemed so hopeless! No matter how hard we thought the mad mind of Fraser would always be one jump ahead of us! And maybe we didn't dare even think! If Fraser were able to read minds--as I was nearly sure he was--then hadn't we better keep our minds blank even down here? But an instant's thought showed me the flaw in my logic. Fraser could, without much doubt, read minds--when those minds were close to him. If he could read minds at a distance then he wouldn't need to ask us for information.

But why had he put us here? I burrowed around for the answer. Had he guessed we had outwitted Doctor Semple and not taken the mad serum after all, and was this punishment? No, if Fraser had guessed that he would simply have given us more serum, as he had Brice. Brice! Where was poor Brice now? Was he an idiot, with blank face and shiny, soulless eyes? My mind shuddered away from the thought, taking refuge in my first question: Why were we here? What was Fraser going to do with us?

We lost all track of time. In spite of my winding it my watch stopped and the hours slipped by uncounted. Night came, and another dawn and another night. Twice our roof was lifted and our tiny swinging cell filled with the orange light of the nourishment ray. But we saw no one

nor did anyone speak to us. The third day passed in the same isolated silence. Occasionally Foulet or I would utter a monosyllable; the sound of our voices was comforting and the single words would convey little to a listener.

But as the hours of the third night slowly passed the atmosphere in our tiny swinging cell grew tense. Something was going to happen. I could feel it and I knew by Foulet's eyes that he felt it too. The air was tight, electrical. Standing on tiptoe, I glued my eyes to the narrow slit which was our only ventilation. But I could see nothing. The brilliant rosy glow blinded me. I couldn't even see the huge platform floating above our heads.

Then, suddenly, our roof slid back. The magnetic ray was deflected. Above us, in the opening of the trap-door, leered the bright, mad eyes of Fraser.

"Good evening," he said mockingly. "How do you feel?" We smiled hesitantly. Something in his voice made me feel he was addressing us as sane men and not idiots. But why? Weren't we supposed to be idiots when he put us down there?

"You ought to feel all right," Fraser went on critically. "The first dose of that serum lasts only three days. It's cumulative," he added with his professional air. "In the beginning an injection every three days. Then once a week and so on. There's a man who has been with me for three years who needs treatment only once every three months. Well, are you ready to talk?"

\* \* \* \* \*

So that was it! He had put us down here till the supposed effects of that serum had worn off; and now we were to talk; tell him everything his agents had been risking their lives to find out! We were to sell out our countries to him; betray all the secrets we had sworn by eternity to keep! If we did as he demanded both France and the United States would be at his mercy--and he had no mercy! He was not a man; he was a cruel, power-loving, scientific machine. I clamped my teeth. Never would I talk! I had sworn to protect my country's secrets with my life--and my vow would be kept!

"You will talk?" Fraser asked again, his voice suddenly suave and beseeching. "For those who talk there are--rewards."

"Let down the ladder," said Foulet, in a quiet, conversational tone. "It will be easier to discuss this--"

Fraser's eyes narrowed to gleaming slits. He smiled craftily. "The ladder will be let down--when you talk."



"And if," suggested Foulet, "we don't wish to talk?"

Fraser's lips stretched in a wider grin. His white teeth gleamed. His shiny black eyes glittered. In that warm, rosy light he looked like a demon from hell. He held out his hand. In it shone a long, slender instrument.

"This knife," he said softly, "Will cut the steel cables that connect you to this platform--as if they were cheese! You will talk?" Beside me I heard Foulet gasp. Swiftly my imagination conjured up the picture of our fate. Our determined refusal to divulge the secrets of our respective countries; the severing, one by one, of the four cables holding us to the platform; the listing of our swinging cell; the tipping, the last, terrible plunge two thousand feet. But it would be swift. The power of the magnetic ray would give us no time to think--to suffer. It would be a merciful end....

"Let us up," bargained Foulet. "We will talk." Fraser laughed.

"None of that," he said slyly. "You talk from there and if your information doesn't dove-tail with what I already know--" he flourished the steel knife suggestively.

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We were caught! No amount of bluff would save us now. Fraser demanded that truth, facts, actual information--and he wouldn't be fooled by anything spurious. Foulet's shoulder touched mine as we peered up through the roof of our cell at our mad captor. We spoke together:

"There is nothing to say."

The assured smile left Fraser's lips. His eyes glittered red. His whole mad face was contorted with fury. A volley of oaths poured through his twisted mouth. With a gesture of insane rage he pulled the nearest cable to him and slashed it with the knife!

Our cell tilted. Foulet and I were thrown in a heap on the floor. We sprang up to face Fraser again through the roof. His mad eyes glared down at us, soul-chilling, maniacal.

"Talk!" he snarled. "Talk--or I'll slice another!" He drew the second cable to him, holding it in readiness.

I clenched my teeth. Beside me I could see the muscles of Foulet's jaw working. Talk? Never!

"Talk!" screamed Fraser. "Talk!" Our silence and our white faces were

his only answer. There was a gleam of the knife in the rosy light. Our cell lurched, quivered, then caught. Would it hold with only two cables? It was hanging on its side. We were standing on what had been the wall. Through the opening in the roof we could see nothing but rosy light and distant stars. How strong were the cables? Could they hold against the pull of the magnetic ray? We could feel the pull now; feel the strain on the cables above us. If Fraser cut the third one--

"Talk!" his voice came, hoarse with fury. "Talk now! You can't see me," he went on; "but I'm pulling the third cable toward me. I'm raising the knife. Will you talk?"

Standing on that quaking wall Foulet and I stared at each other. How long would it be? One second? Half a minute? Thank God it would be quick! This was the worst now. This eternity of waiting.... "I'm cutting it!" yelled Fraser--and with his words the cell lurched, swung, whirled like a spinning top. Foulet and I were tossed around like dried peas in a pod.

Suddenly the thing steadied. Two steel hooks were clamped on the edge of the opening in what had been the roof, and Brice stared at us through the aperture!

"Quick!" he gasped. "There's not a second to lose. Don't stare! Quick, I say. I've got the ladder here. It's steel and it'll hold. Climb up."

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Dumbly we obeyed. Our heads were whirling, our bodies bruised and mashed by the shaking up. Blindly, dizzily we climbed up the ladder, scrambled out on the platform. Solid footing again! As Brice loosed the ladder and pulled it up, there was a snap. The last cable had gone! The cell shot down to earth with a speed that must have reduced it to a powder. Foulet and I stared after it, dazed, unbelieving. Brice's whisper hissed in our ears.

"Listen carefully," he gripped our shoulders. "I'm not mad. They shot the stuff into me, but I found an antidote in Semple's office and used it right away. Now listen to me! Our plane is over there," he pointed across the platform. "It's all ready to take off. They think they're sending me off on an errand for them at dawn. It's ready for a long trip. Go there; get in; and if any one questions you tell them it's orders. They won't, though. No one gives orders here but Fraser." Brice nodded toward a dark heap beside the trap-door.

"You killed him?" asked Foulet.

"Stunned him," said Brice. "He may come to at any moment and if he does--"

"Suppose we bind him and take him in the plane?" I suggested.

Brice shook his head. "Leave him here. It's safer. Now go. Get in the plane and take off--"

"And not wait for you?" I gasped, "You're crazy--"

"I'll be there. You can pick me up later. There's no time to explain--but you'll know. Take off; then circle around and come back. But watch out!" He gave us both a shove toward the plane, the dim shadow of which we could see across the platform.

We took a step toward it, and then turned back. How could we go without Brice? But he had vanished. And in the shadow of the trap door Fraser groaned.

We waited no longer. To hesitate was to court death. Deliberately, as if we were acting under orders, we walked toward the plane. As Brice had said, it was in readiness. Evidently he was to have started at once. We climbed in, our hearts in our throats. A mechanic stepped forward. The propeller roared. But, above the roar of the propeller we heard a yell of fury--and Fraser, dazed and reeling, came stumbling across the platform toward us!

\* \* \* \* \*

Foulet took the controls. The plane taxied across the platform, swooped into space. But it was not till it had risen and steadied that I realized the complete idiocy of our forlorn hope of escape. What fools we were! And Brice--Brice must, in truth, be mad! How could we get away? How could we ever escape the terrific power of the magnetic ray? That ray that Fraser worked himself from his laboratory--the ray that had drawn us first across the desert to this floating island of madness! It would be a matter of seconds before Fraser would reach it and turn it on us. There was no escape--none!

In despair I looked back at the platform. To eyes ignorant of its horror it would have been an amazing and gorgeous sight. The crimson lamps of the magnetic ray bloomed like huge desert flowers on the sand two thousand feet below us; the rays flamed up with the glory of an Italian sunset and, poised in space like a dark butterfly, floated the huge platform bathed in its rosy light. It was beautiful. It was unbelievable. It was horrible. I gazed, fascinated. When would Fraser reach the lamp? When would he turn it on? I stared at the dark shadow that I knew was the laboratory building. My eyes strained through the growing distance. When would the glow come? That glow that meant our death!

Suddenly I gasped. The light had gone! The great lamps down on the desert floor were out! Darkness, swift, comforting, wrapped us in velvet folds.

"Brice!" I yelled. "Brice has cut off the lamps--he's released the platform. God! Look--Foulet!" My voice tore through my throat; my eyes burned with sudden, blinding emotion. In the soft darkness of the starry night I could see the platform waver, topple, rise! It rose straight up, tilting and swaying in the light breeze. What was it Fraser had said? If it was released it would go straight to the stars! It was on its way!

But Brice! Where was Brice? Was he on that terrible rising island? I strained my eyes through the darkness. Already Foulet had banked the plane--we were circling; turning back. A tiny white speck took shape beneath the rising island. A parachute! Brice was safe!

\* \* \* \* \*

Ten minutes later we slid along the hard desert sand and came to a stop. Brice came running over toward us. Foulet and I climbed out of the plane to meet him. Silently we gripped hands. It was a solemn moment. Beside us reared the great plane that would take us back to safety--back to the familiar life we knew and loved. Around us stretched the trackless wastes of the Great Arabian Desert--and above, somewhere between us and the stars, soared the floating island of madness.

"They believed I was mad," said Brice as we climbed back into the plane. "I watched Fraser. I spied on the men. There were about thirty up there, and finally I saw where they regulated those lamps. The rest was easy--all except the minute when I found Fraser kneeling beside that trap-door slicing the cables. For a second I thought it was all up."

"You got us just in time," I muttered. But you can't be grateful with an Englishman. They won't stand for it.

"Oh, bosh," Brice murmured, as the plane swung its nose toward that far distance that was home. "Well, it's all over--but it's a story that can never be told. The fate of Mad Fraser will have to remain a mystery--for no one would believe us if we told them!"

\* \* \* \* \*

## THE FEELING

By Roger Dee

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from  
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the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

*If this story holds true in real  
practice, it may reveal something  
about us that we've never known.*

"We're just starting on the first one--Walraven, ship's communications man," Costain said, low-voiced. "Captain Maxon and Vaughn have called in. There's been no word from Ragan."

Coordinator Erwin took his seat beside the psychologist, his bearing as militarily authoritative in spite of civilian clothing as the room's air was medical.

"Maybe Ragan won't turn up," Erwin said. "Maybe we've still got a man out there to bring the ship back."

Costain made a quieting gesture, his eyes on the three-man psych team grouped about Walraven's wheeled reclining chair. "They've given Walraven a light somnolent. Not enough to put him out, just enough to make him relive the flight in detail. Accurately."

The lead psych man killed the room's lighting to a glow. "Lieutenant Walraven, the ship is ready. You are at your post, with Captain Maxon and Lieutenants Vaughn and Ragan. The first Mars flight is about to blast off. How do you feel?"

Walraven lay utterly relaxed, his face dreaming. His voice had the waning sound of a tape running down for lack of power.

"Jumpy," he said. "But not really afraid. We're too well conditioned for that, I guess. This is a big thing, an important thing. Exciting."

\* \* \* \*

It had been exciting at first. The long preparation over, training and study and news interviews and final parties all dreamlike and part of the past. Outside now, invisible but hearteningly present beyond the ship's impermeable hull, the essential and privileged people waiting to see them off. The ship's power plant was humming gently like a giant, patient cat.

Captain Maxon passed out muscle-relaxant capsules. The total boneless relaxation that was their defense against acceleration came quickly.

The ship was two hours out, beyond lunar orbit and still accelerating, when, trained for months against the moment, set each about his task. Readings occupied Maxon and Vaughn and Ragan while Walraven checked his communications and telemetering gear.

It was not until the transmitter slot had licked up its first coded tape--no plain text here, security before even safety--and reported all well, the predicted borne out, that they became aware of the Feeling.

The four of them sat in their unsqueaking gimbaled seats and looked at each other, sharing the Feeling and knowing that they shared it, but not why. Vaughn, who was given to poetry and some degree of soul-searching, made the first open recognition.

"There's something wrong," he said.

The others agreed and, agreeing, could add nothing of explanation to the wrongness. Time passed while they sat, seeing within themselves for the answer--and if not for answer, at least for identification--but nothing came and nothing changed except that with time the steady pressure of the Feeling grew stronger.

Vaughn, again, was first to react to the pressure. "We've got to do something." He twisted out of his seat and wavered in the small pseudogravity of the ship's continuing acceleration. "I've never in my life felt so desolate, so--"

He stopped. "There aren't any words," he said helplessly.

Less articulate than Vaughn and knowing it, the others did not try to help find the words. Only Ragan, professional soldier without family or close tie anywhere in the world, had a suggestion.

"The ship's power plant is partly psionic," Ragan said. "I don't understand the principle, but it's been drilled into us that no other system can give a one-directional thrust without reaction. The

psi-drive is tied into our minds in the same way it's tied into the atomic and electronic components. It's part of us and we're part of it."

Even Maxon, crew authority on the combination drive, missed his meaning at first.

"If our atomic shielding fails," Ragan explained, "we're irradiated. If our psionics bank fails, we may feel anything. Maybe the trouble is there."

Privately they disagreed, certain that nothing so disquieting as the Feeling that weighted them down could be induced even by so cryptic a marriage of dissimilar principles as made up the ship's power plant. Still it was a possible avenue of relief.

"It's worth trying," Maxon said, and they checked.

And checked, and checked.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We worked for hours," Walraven said, "but nothing came of it. None of us, even Maxon, knew enough about the psi-drive to be sure, but we ended up certain that the trouble wasn't there. It was in us."

The drug was wearing thin, leaving him pale and shaken. His face had a glisten of sweat under the lowered lights.

The lead psych man chose a hypodermic needle, looked to Erwin and Costain for authority, and administered a second injection.

"You gave up searching," he said. "What then, Lieutenant?"

"We waited," Walraven said.

He relaxed, his face smoothing to impersonal detachment as his mind slipped back to the ship and its crew. Watching, Costain felt a sudden deep unease as if the man's mind had really winged back through time and space and carried a part of his own with it.

"There was only one more possible check," Walraven said. "We had to wait two days for that."

The check was Maxon's idea, simple of execution and unarguable of result. At halfway point acceleration must cease, the ship rotate on its gyros and deceleration set in. There would be a period of waiting when the power plant must be shut off completely.

If the Feeling stemmed from the psi-drive, it would lift then.

It did not lift. They sat weightless and disoriented while the gyros precessed and the ship swung end by end and the steady pressure of the Feeling mounted up and up without relief.

"It gets worse every hour," Vaughn said raggedly.

"It's not a matter of time," Maxon said. "It's the distance. The Feeling grows stronger as we get farther from home."

They sat for another time without talk, feeling the distance build up behind them and sensing through the unwindowed hull of the ship what the emptiness outside must be like. The ship was no longer an armored projectile bearing them snugly and swiftly to a first planetfall. It was a walnut shell without strength or direction.

In the end they talked out their problem because there was nothing else they could do.

"We're men," Maxon said, not as if he must convince himself but as if it were a premise that had to be made, a starting point for all logic. "We're reasoning creatures. If the trouble lies in ourselves we can find its source and its reason for being."

He picked Vaughn first because Vaughn had been first to sense the wrongness and because the most sensitive link in a chain is also predictably its weakest.

"Try," Maxon said. "I know there are no words to describe this thing, but get as close as you can."

\* \* \* \* \*

Vaughn tried. "It isn't home-sickness. It's a different thing altogether from nostalgia. It's not just fear. I'm afraid--not of any thing, just afraid in the way a child is afraid of falling in his dreams, when he's really had no experience with falling because he's never fallen more than a few inches in his life.... When I think of my wife, it's not the same at all as if I were just in some far corner of the Earth with only land and water between us. Even if I were marooned on an uncharted island somewhere with no hope of seeing home again, I wouldn't feel this way. There wouldn't be this awful pulling."

Ragan agreed with Vaughn that the Feeling was essentially a pull, but beyond agreement could add nothing. Ragan had covered the world without forming a tie to hold him; one place was as good as another and he felt no loss for any particular spot on Earth.

"I only want to be back there," he said simply. "Anywhere but here."



"I was born on a farm in New England," Walraven said. "Out of the land, like my father and his people before him. I'm part of that land, no matter how far from it I go, because everything I am came from it. I feel uprooted. I don't belong here."

\_Uprooted\_ was the key for which they had hunted.

Maxon said slowly, "There are wild animals on Earth that can't live away from their natural homes. Insects--how does a termite feel, cut off from its hive? Maybe that's our trouble. Something bigger than individual men made the human race what it is. Maybe we've been a sort of composite being all along, without knowing it, tied together by the need of each other and not able to exist apart. Maybe no one knew it before because no one was ever isolated in the way we are."

Walraven had more to say, almost defiant in his earnestness. "This is going to sound wild, but I've been fighting inside myself ever since Vaughn mentioned being pulled toward home. I have the feeling that if I'd only let go, I'd be back where I belong." He snapped his fingers, the sound loud in the room. "Like that."

No one laughed because each found in himself the same conviction waiting to be recognized. Ragan said, "Walraven's right. There's no place on Earth I care for more than another, but I feel I could be back there in any one of them"--he snapped his fingers, as Walraven had done--"as quickly as that."

"I know," Maxon said. "But we can't let go. We were sent out to put this ship into orbit around Mars. We've got to take her there."

\* \* \* \* \*

Walraven said, "It wasn't easy. The Feeling got worse as we went out and out. Knowing what it was helped a little, but not enough. We held onto each other, the four of us, to keep the group together. We \_knew\_ what would happen if we let go."

The head psych man looked to Costain and put his needle away when Costain shook his head.

"The ship," Coordinator Erwin said sharply. "Walraven, you did put her into orbit?"

"Yes," Walraven said. "We put her into orbit and turned on the telemetering equipment--they'll be picking up her signals by now--and then we turned our backs on each other and we let go. There wasn't any feeling of motion or speed, but I felt a fresh breeze on my face and when I opened my eyes I was standing beside a familiar stone fence on

a hill above the house where I was born. You haven't told me, but the others came back, too, didn't they?"

"All but Ragan," Erwin said. His tone made Costain think wryly, \_Even the military can snatch at straws\_. "Maxon and Vaughn called in. But we haven't heard from Ragan."

"He wasn't left behind," Walraven said with certainty. "Ragan has no family, but he has a home. We're standing on it."

An orderly came in with an envelope for Costain, who opened it and handed the paper to Erwin. To Walraven, Costain said, "It's a cablegram from North Ireland. Ragan is back."

Erwin was still gripping the paper in his hand when he walked with Costain out of the hospital into the bright airiness of a spring day. He glared at the warm, blue sky.

"We'll find a way," Erwin said. "We've proved that we can put men on Mars. With the right conditioning, we can keep them there."

"You're a dedicated and resolute man, Coordinator," Costain said. "Do you really suppose that any amount of conditioning could fit you to do what those boys failed at?"

The long moment of considering that passed before Erwin answered left a fine sheen of sweat on his face.

"No," Erwin said.

# DAWNINGSBURGH

By Wallace West

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from  
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the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

A lean wind wails through the age-old avenues of Dawningsburgh.

Mornings, it brings sand from surrounding hills and scrubs at fresh  
paint, neon signs endlessly proclaiming the city's synthetic name  
and street markers in seven languages.

At sunrise it prepares the dunes for footprints of scurrying guided  
tourists.

When icy night clamps down and the intruders scamper to their  
hotels, the wind howls as it flings after them a day's collection  
of paper cups, bottle caps and other picnic offal.

\* \* \* \* \*

VACATION  
AT STORIED  
DAWNINGSBURGH

\_The Cradle  
of Martian Civilization\_

RESTORED!  
REPOPULATED!

TOUR SCARLET DESERTS  
DINE ON EXOTIC FOODS  
DANCE  
COCKTAILS FREE

MAKE NEW FRIENDS

\_FARE ONLY \$5,000 UP  
A FULL YEAR TO PAY\_

SEE YOUR TRAVEL AGENT OR YOUR  
NEAREST TRANS-PLANETARY OFFICE NOW!

\* \* \* \* \*

"Liars! Cheats!" whimpered Betsy O'Reilly as she tossed on the lumpy bed of her third class room and recalled the sky poster that had hypnotized her.

Now, Betsy was disappointed and bored. Slim, pretty, freckled and pert, but ten years older than she wished, she had mortgaged her secretarial salary to engage once more in The Eternal Quest. And, as always, the quest was proving futile. Eligible bachelors shunned Dawningsburgh as they did other expensive tourist traps. The "new friends" she had made were either loudmouthed, hairy miners en route to or from the orichalcum diggings, or middle-aged couples on tragic second honeymoons, or self-styled emigre artists and novelists intent on cadging free meals and any other favors that lonely females might grant.

But maybe, Betsy tried to console herself, there was something real here; something glamorous that she could find and cling to during the long months back in New York when she would have to subsist on soups and salads in order to pay her debt to Trans-Plan. Mars had been great, the guides insisted. Once, they said, it had even colonized Atlantis. Perhaps, under the sham and away from those awful conducted tours, something was still left that could make her feel a trifle less forlorn.

Betsy jumped out of bed and rummaged in a closet. There it was! A heated emergency garment equipped with plastic helmet, air pack and a searchlight. Required by law but seldom used, since tourists were told to stay off the 60° below zero streets at night.

Wriggling into the clumsy thing, she tested valves and switches as she had been instructed. Then she tiptoed out of her cubbyhole, down a corridor and into the hotel lobby.

The room clerk did not greet her with its usual trill. A robot, built on Earth as a "stand-in" for one of the vanished Martians, it had turned itself off when the last tourists left the dining room for their beds. But how lifelike it still looked, balancing on a perch behind the ornate plastic desk. And how human too, despite the obviously avian ancestry of the race it mimicked. What was it the guides had said about the way in which all intelligent lifeforms so far discovered closely resembled one another? Why, even artificial Martians made the average human look drab and clumsy.

Betsy circled the overdecorated room like a shadow and pushed against the street door. Escaping air whistled through the crack.

"Miss!" squawked the clerk, triggered alive by the noise. "Don't...."

She was outside by then and running through the crazy half-light thrown by Mars's nearer and farther moons. Wind howled and tugged at her. Cold turned the breath from her helmet vent into snow.

\* \* \* \*

When no pursuit developed she stopped, gasping, before one of the open-air shops she had toured that afternoon. Five "Martians" bent stiffly over lathes and other machines, just where they had stopped after the last visitor departed. Hoarfrost mottled their leather harness, their downy red skins and the scars on their shoulders where atrophied wings had supposedly been amputated. No breath came from their nostrils. How cold and small they looked!

On impulse, she approached briskly.

"Yes, Miss?" The robot proprietor unkinked as its automatic relays turned it on. It came forward with a grimace meant to represent a smile. "You're out very late. What may I show you?" Its voice was like a rusted bird song.

"Tell me," said she, "what the Martians really made here."

"Why, we design jewelry, Miss. I have some nice...."

"No, no!" she interrupted. "What did the real Martians make here? Surely not junk jewelry for tasteless tourists. Something beautiful, it must have been. Wind bells? Dreams? Snowflakes? Please tell me."

The robot twittered and flinched like a badly made toy.

"I d-do not understand," it ventured at last. "I am not programmed to answer such questions. Perhaps the guides can do so. Now may I show you...."

"Thank you, no." She touched the thing's cold, six-fingered hand with quick compassion. "But I'll ask the guides. Good night."

Back in the street, she began to retrace her tour of the afternoon. Here was what the guide had called a "typical home." This time she did not disturb the mother, father and one furry child with budding wings who clustered about what experts thought must have been a telepathic amplifier. It did not work any longer--none but the coarsest Martian machines did--yet the frost-rimed robots sat stiffly enchanted before it, as they would do until the sun rose and tourists resumed their endless tramp. (The day's last, she noted, had left an empty pop bottle

in the mother's lap.)

Farther on she met a "policeman", resplendent in metal harness, leaning forlornly against an anachronistic lamppost. Some late-prowling jokester had stuck a cigarette between its still lips.

Surely not policemen here? She looked up at the fairy towers that laced the stars. Surely not in this grave place. It must be one of those human touches introduced by Trans-Planetary to make tourists smile and feel superior. Nevertheless, she removed the cigarette and ground it under her heel.

After walking half a mile through the sand-whipped night, Betsy paused before a structure of translucent spires and flying buttresses where a library had once been housed. No robots were on duty there and no serious attempt had been made at restoration. No Champollion had appeared in the early days of exploration to decipher some Martian Rosetta stone, and by now the historical record had been hopelessly scrambled by souvenir hunters.

But that didn't matter really, they said. Outside of the tourist trade the only really valuable things on the dying planet were extensive deposits of orichalcum, an ore rich in pure radium. Thanks to the impartial mining monopoly established by Trans-Planetary twenty years ago, orichalcum supplied the nations of Earth with sinews of war which they had not yet dared use, and fuel for ships that were questing greedily farther and farther out into the darkness of space.

So metal-paged books had long vanished from the library's stacks and its sand-strewn halls were littered with broken rolls of tape. How long would it be, she wondered as she passed on with a sigh, before the guides realized that even those mute tapes could be sold as souvenirs?

\* \* \* \* \*

Phobos had set by now. She turned on the searchlight, checked her air tank--the gauge showed enough reserve for another hour--and defiantly opened the face plate of her helmet. The atmosphere was cold; cold as a naked blade. It had a heady tang and she stood taking in great gulps of it until a warning dizziness forced her to close the plate. The guides were wrong again! A human could learn to breathe this air!

Leaving the gutted library, Betsy breasted the wind as she ploughed through shifting dunes toward a structure shimmering on the other side of the plaza. This, the guides pattered, was a cathedral. When the place now called Dawningsburgh had been alive, they said, its inhabitants gathered at the shrine each evening to sip one ceremonial drink of precious water, shed two ceremonial tears for the days when Mars had been young and worship a flock of atavistic winged princesses

who performed ceremonial flights under a pressurized, transparent dome in the rays of the setting sun.

This showplace had, of course, been restored right down to its last perch, and had been equipped with a full complement of "worshippers." At the climax of each day's final guided tour, visitors jammed themselves into the nave, sipped cocktails, "ohed", "ahed" and even shed tears along with the robots as they gawked at mannequins flying above them on invisible wires in the best Peter Pan tradition.

Ducking under the electric eye that would have started a performance, Betsy tiptoed into the structure. It was quieter than any grave. Several hundred robots huddled there on their perches, drinks in hand, ready to go into their act. At the far end of the transept a soaring mural, gleaming phosphorescently, hinted at the lakes, seas and forests of Mars's prehistory. Under the dome a single flyer dangled, its plumes trailing.

For long minutes Betsy stood in the dimness, seeking to capture the mystery and wonder of this place. In ruins, it would have swept her with ecstasy, as had her moonlit view of the Parthenon. Restored and "repopulated," it made her sick and ashamed of her race ... no, not of her race, exactly, but of the few hucksters who debased its thirst for knowledge and beauty.

Then a bird started to sing!

A bird? On Mars? This must be a tape, triggered on somehow despite her care in avoiding the electric eye. Any moment now, the robots would begin their mindless worship.

She shuddered and turned to escape. But something held her. She crept instead, step by soundless step, toward the source of that exquisite music.

An almost naked male robot had materialized before the mural. It was singing, far better than any nightingale, its strange hands outstretched to the radiance.

Such notes could not ... should not ... spring from the throat of a machine. Heart in mouth, Betsy advanced with infinite care. By the mural's light she saw that the newcomer had no hoarfrost coating. And the moisture of its breath condensed and fell to the floor like a blessing. She reached out a small hand to touch its scarred shoulder, then jerked back.

The shoulder was warm!

\* \* \* \* \*

"Greetings, girl," Betsy's brain whispered to her. "You're out late. Just let me finish this thing and we'll have a chat."

The music soared, uninterrupted, to a climax sparkling with grace notes and glittering with chromatic trills.

"Now," fluted the creature, turning and fixing her with golden, freewheeling eyes, "what brings a tourist" (the word was a curse) "here at this hour?"

"L-love," she gulped, hardly knowing what she said. "I-I mean, I wanted to find out if anything real was left. And, well, I ran away from the hotel. They'll be coming after me, I suppose."

"Don't fret. Martians can play tricks with time. I'll return you to your room well before they get here."

"You--you're not just another, fancier, robot?"

"I'm alive enough." He bowed with a sweep that seemed to invest him with wings. "Pitaret Mura, at your service. A princeling of sorts. An iconoclast. And an atavist like you."

"There are others here?" Her eyes grew round.

"Most of the others have finished with this outgrown eyrie and are away on larger affairs. Only I return with a few friends once each year to sing of past glories and weep over present desecrations."

"Two ceremonial tears?" she asked with a return of bitterness. There was something in his attitude that she found disquieting.

"Many more than two. But...." he shrugged angrily, "I grow tired of weeping. On this visit I plan to wipe out you little humans who foul the nest of my ancestors."

"How?" She gripped his arm, fear racing through her.

"Tomorrow all this junk--" he nodded his handsome head at the robots--"will have been replaced by real Martians ... youngsters out for a lark with me. We'll tend shop, make jewelry and all that until I give a signal. Perhaps this shrine would be the best place. When it's crowded, just at sunset. Then we pounce!"

Mura ruffled himself up and sprang at her so convincingly that she shrieked.

"How juvenile!" she managed to laugh shakily.



"What did you say, human?" The Pitaret was taken aback by this unexpected thrust.

"I said your plan is childish!" She stamped her foot. "So you cut the throats of a few stupid people. Then Earth sends up cobalt bombs and blows this cradle of Martian civilization to smithereens. The others won't like that, even if they are occupied with larger affairs. You would be in real trouble."

"Hmmm!" He looked at her with new respect and a faint tinge of uncertainty. "But some punishment is justified. Even you can see that."

"Yes," she admitted, wrinkling her nose at him, now that the worst was over. "This place is a horror. And we tourists are horrors too, for having let ourselves be taken in by it. But death isn't punishment, just an ending."

"I hadn't thought of it that way." Mura slipped an arm around her shoulders and looked down at her impishly. " \_You\_ suggest a fitting punishment then."

\* \* \* \* \*

Here was the final test. If she could keep the hold that she had somehow gained over this immature superman, horrible things might be averted. Her thoughts raced in circles.

"Martians can play tricks with time?" she asked at last.

"Oh, yes. Time is like this mural. Let me show you: Aim your light at the left-hand corner of the picture. See the sun and its planets forming out of cosmic dust? Now move the beam toward the right. Slowly.... Slowly! Notice how Martian oceans form and living things crawl out of them.

"Now continue. There you see the winged Martians with their cities that long have crumbled to dust. Next, water grows scarce and canals are built. Here all but a few of us have lost our wings.

"Here we colonize Earth ... to our eternal regret. Finally, you see us abandon Mars rather than risk another test of strength with you pushing troglodytes."

"I-I don't understand," she whispered, strangely moved.

"That searchlight beam represents the living present. Where it shines, life pulses briefly on a vast mural that is painted across time, from its beginning to its end. Martians manipulate the light of the present

as we please, living when we please, so long as we please."

"How dreadful.... Wonderful, I mean." She gazed at him worshipfully.  
"And you can do this for humans too?"

"For short periods, yes. But stop fluttering your lovely eyelashes at me. Punished you are going to be. If you can suggest nothing better than my plan, I'll go back to it and take the consequences. Otherwise I'll be the laughing stock of my friends."

"And you couldn't stand that, could you, poor boy?" She patted his hand before he snatched it away. "How is this, then, for an alternative? Tonight, when I couldn't sleep, I got to thinking that there could be no more fitting punishment for tourists than to be forced to live, for years and years, in a plush hotel at Atlantic City, Las Vegas ... or Dawningsburgh. Think how miserable they would become if they had to take the same tours over and over with the same guides; stuff themselves on the same meals; dance to the same orchestras with the same new friends. Can you hold your time spotlight still here for, say, ten years?"

"Of course," Mura crowed as he swept her into his downy arms and danced her about among the robot perches. "A wonderful idea. You're a genius. Even the others may come back, now, to watch humans squirm, yawn--and perhaps learn to respect their elders. How can I repay you?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Let me go back to New York," she said, feeling like a traitor.

"That wouldn't be fair. You're a tourist. You came here to prove to yourself that, as your Bible puts it, 'a living dog is better than a dead lion.' You must learn your lessons along with others."

"I suppose you're right." She felt cleaner now, even though the prospect of a decade at Dawningsburgh, with The Quest unfinished, appalled her. To be forty-one and still single when she returned to Earth! Two tears trickled down her freckled nose.

"That's better," the Pitaret sang happily. "You're already beginning to understand the meaning of our ancient ceremonial. Give me ten years and I'll make a real Martian of you!"

Outside, the lean wind echoed his glee as it tossed a hatful of Good Humor sticks and sand-coated lollipops against the cathedral wall.

End of the Project Gutenberg EBook of *Dawningsburgh*, by Wallace West

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